망나니
왕자가
LEGEND OF SWORD'S SONG
글럼프
퓨전 판타지
장편소설
되었다
GOLEM
FACTORY

I BECAME THE FIRST PRINCE

-Legend of Sword's Song-

– 망나니 1왕자가 되었다 –

- VOLUME 1 -

-AUTHOR-

Glump

[Active Translations]

– STORY –

Reborn as a sword, he lived for hundreds of years, and then he occupied the body of a 15-year-old prince.

– GENRE –

Action Adventure Drama Fantasy

PROLOGUE

Like many others, I met my fate and died, leaving behind everything I used to be. Though inevitable, death is never permanent. I was soon reincarnated, but this time as a sword. Without a human body of my own, I waited in silence as the world around me continued to turn and change. But this patient waiting eventually ended when an opportunity presented itself.

The hard metallic body that has been my home soon became flesh when I managed to take over an infamous prince's body.

His body was stouter than most; others would even bluntly call it obese. But this was no concern for me since he still had a lot of potential waiting to be polished.

In my time, I have raised a few kids—the great knight known as the Undefeated, and the feared Dragon Slayer. I raised them both, so handling this new body is nothing for me.

CHAPTER 1
PRINCE OF MANGANI (1)

Fate had other plans for me when it decided to bring me back to the world as a sword.

Like any sword, my existence revolved around serving one master until a more worthy one claimed me; this was the natural law in the life of knights—only the strong can wield a strong sword. Eventually, I found my fate sealed in a worthy champion's hands, one I would eventually call my friend.

Together, we soared to heights others could only dream of. Countless foes and monsters have met their end at the tip of my blade. No one stood a chance against us, not even the White Dragon of the Frost Mountains, whose death in my friend and companion's hands made him into the king of his nation.

He ruled with wisdom, and his kingdom prospered. But all things that begin must soon face its end; not even the Dragon Slayer of legend can evade death forever.

"Please take care of my descendants as you had with me."

And just like that, what looked like an inseparable partnership ended. And I was passed down to my friend's descendants along with the legend of the Dragon Slayer.

* * *

'Uhm.'

Years of peaceful dreams were suddenly disturbed by a commotion. I awoke to investigate what roused me from my slumber to find myself in the hands of a fat human who was waving me in the air wildly.

"From now on, I am the master of this sword!" he declares, thick air of arrogance swirling around him.

"Your Highness, no one other than His Majesty is allowed to touch the sacred sword. Please return it at once!" pleaded the escort knight to get the prince to let go of me.

'Prince?'

I looked around the area and found the royal crest of the kingdom. The obese person who arrogantly claimed to be my new master is indeed the prince, a descendant of my friend.

'Is he a prince, or a pig?' I can't help but wonder. Not a single inch of his body resembles that of my friend whose bravery was comparable to that of a lion. This person looked more like a pig than a mighty beast.

"Shut up! There's nothing I can't touch in this country!" he fumed, anger and frustration swelling inside him.

I have seen a lot in my lifetime, but this one was a truly shocking experience.

'*Nonsense!'*

News of what became my friend's lineage is hard to accept, so I decided to use the power of Judgment to find the truth.

□ *Adrian Leonberger [male, 16 years old]*

□ *Aptitude. [none]*

□ *Characteristics. [Skeptic], [High Obesity], [Sheltered], [Horny], [Indolence], [Gullible], [Mana Response Disorder]*

Leonberger… The very mention of the name was enough to knock the words out of me. It confirmed my deepest fears. He was indeed my friend's descendant, but he was a descendant only by name, for his qualities could never match those my friend Gruhorn.

"With this sword by my side, His Majesty and the other nobles will have no choice but to follow meI" He announces arrogantly in the room for everyone there to hear.

"I don't intend to lend you any of my powers."

"Great Dragon Slayer! Give me strength!" The fat prince shrieked.

"No."

“Gruhorn!” He shouted even louder with a tone of impatience.

This time I didn’t answer. The prince may be my friend’s descendant, but whether or not he is worthy of my power is another story.

“Ugh-woo-oh-oh-oh!” He grabbed me and ran around like the lunatic that he is. A fat prince turned wild boar with a deadly sword on his hands.

“Oh, this is bad!”

“Your Majesty! Please put the sword back!”

“You must not take the sword outside of the palace!”

All of their words fell on deaf ears as the prince went on with his theatrics. The other people didn’t react much to his actions, hinting that his antics might as well be his typical behavior every day.

Everything seemed like a harmless joke until he tried to use me to slash the air. His untrained body couldn’t maintain his balance, and he ended up falling forward.

There was a loud bump as his entire weight crashed onto the ground. My body, which was sharp enough to sever even the scales of mighty dragons, quickly burrowed itself into his soft flesh.

‘Huh?’

The smell of blood permeated my entire senses, something I have not experienced for a long time.

‘Oh, no!’

Panic engulfed me as I realized there was only one possible source of the blood that now coated me—my oldest friend’s descendant. Ironic that I who was charged with keeping him safe was the one who ended his life.

But the feeling of anguish was quickly replaced by a weird sensation that overwrote my entire senses. Suddenly, I don’t feel like my usual self. Physical pain, which I have not felt since my reincarnation as a sword, suddenly hit me. I could feel a large wound throbbing in my abdomen.

I tried to make sense of what was happening, but my vision was starting to fade. Even my consciousness began slipping away. Soon, everything turned dark, and I felt myself succumbing once more to a deep slumber.

* * *

When asked about who Adrian Leonberger is, most people would avoid the question with an awkward face.

If the one asking was one they trusted, you would hear them tell the story called the "The Royal Shame". If you're lucky, you'll get more specific answers like:

"There's nothing to say about him."

"He is beyond any form of help."

"The only thing great about him is his greed. No one in the kingdom can best him in terms of greed!"

"Stupid, lazy, cruel pig. That's all there is to the prince."

Criticisms like these are thrown around casually over drinks as long as there are no royal guards around.

King Idrión Leonberger was a courageous and wise ruler of the kingdom. But the same could not be said for his eldest son, Prince Adrian, who would inherit the kingdom from him when the time comes. He was like a dark cloud that hangs over the future of the

kingdom, casting a shadow dark enough to eclipse the sun.

Everybody in the kingdom feared that there would be no future for them should he succeed the throne. There was no disagreement regarding this matter; nobody wanted Prince Adrian on the throne.

But something happened one day that took everyone in the palace by surprise. Guards found the prince severely wounded. How he survived was a mystery to even the greatest healers of their kingdom. Although alive, the prince was unconscious.

Some quickly thanked the heavens for helping the kingdom avoid the fate of having

Prince Adrian as their next ruler, and there were also those more prudent who asked first what happened.

Rumors of him getting stabbed by a sword he reckless swung around quickly spread. The fact that it was the sword engraved with the founding king's mark, Dragon Slayer Gruhorn, did not help either.

This short celebration lasted only for a moment, for reports saying Prince Adrian had regained consciousness surfaced. It also says his body was also recovering without a single issue.

As expected, many were disappointed, and some even cried out, saying that the heavens abandoned their kingdom to the hands of the greedy and vain prince.

The prince's recovery brought about changes that not many noticed. The first to detect these changes were the ladies of the royal palace.

"The prince isn't flipping the tables recently like he used to do daily, and he has been silent for several days!"

"He has never called out my group since waking up, not even once!"

The ladies in the palace casually exchanged these words behind the prince's back. They who had been accustomed to the prince's madness daily are taken aback by the lack of commotion since he has woken up.

Despite these rumors flying around the castle walls, there were still those that paid no attention to the changes. Most of them simply assumed that the prince was merely hiding out of embarrassment of what happened. No one was willing to admit that the prince had a genuine change of heart. They were simply quietly biding their time until the prince slowly returns to his usual vanity.

But Prince Adrian, the center of these rumors, was not interested in what they had to say about him. He was more worried about something far more serious—the accident that he had committed.

'Oh my god! I killed my friend's descendant and stole his body!' was all he could think of at the moment.

* * *

It was an accident. No one could blame me.

It wasn't my fault that the legend of the "Dragon Slayer" bewitched the ruined prince, and he callously believed he could become a hero to rival his ancestors.

The feel of the ancient sword on his hands made the prince throb with excitement. He didn't realize how dangerous the sword of legend was until it was too late. He died due to his ambition and carelessness. And now, somehow, through some weird trick of fate, the prince's body lives on as my vessel.

'Please take care of my descendants.'

His friend's old request echoed in his mind once more. But instead of keeping them safe, he ended taking away the life of one of them. But what's worse is that he also took over his body.

Time passed, and it was nearing the full moon. And yet I still could not find it in me to testify what truly happened and how the person who stood in front of them was no longer the same prince they once knew. He couldn't even make himself mourn for the loss of the prince he killed.

"Oh, what can I do now?"

The answer was simple. I have to live on as the dead prince. But before I could even finish my thought, I found myself screaming out in laughter at the irony of the situation.

This was no equivalent exchange. Hundreds of years of accumulated power enough to fell dragons and monsters withered away in exchange for a fat prince's body. The sword of legend that brought this kingdom into existence turned into a pile of flesh.

But I have not faltered before, nor will I now.

If, in the past, I managed to create an undefeated knight out of a submissive child, then surely this would not be a problem for me. Surely, I, who was able to turn numerous people in history into heroes, would succeed in making a hero out of this one.

"First, I need a mana heart."

As always, the first step was to acquire a mana heart. The only difference this time is that I have to take the steps using my own two feet.

CHAPTER 2
PRINCE OF MANGANI (2)

An unexpected visitor visited the mana heart facility today.

“His Highness is coming! Hurry up and arrange your garments! Prepare yourselves for His Highness’s arrival!” echoed in the hall as workers tried their best to look presentable to the prince.

From the look of their faces, one could only assume that the mana heart facility was the last place they would expect Prince Adrian to be, especially after his near-death experience.

“No, why is this man not paying attention even after he almost died?” I found myself thinking out loud

The maid who was helping the general manager looked at me and blushed.

I recalled my current situation, how the prince died at the tip of my blade. And how his body belongs to me now. Closing my mouth seems like the correct thing to do now.

“You can go now. His Majesty, the King, needs your service.” Nogisa dismissed the maid and turned her attention to me, displeased.

“Why do you pretend not to know?” Nogisa’s voice sounded impatient, almost disappointed.

Based on the situation, I can tell that Nogisa was the prince’s teacher whose body I took over. I have no clue what she taught the prince, and I have no way of pretending to know even if I wanted to.

“Your Highness?” her expression changed. She was staring at me as if she saw something strange. I could feel her eyes probing into me, looking for an aberration to analyze.

“Perhaps the trauma of the incident messed up your memories,” she said, “and you may not remember everything about who you are.”

Amnesia was a convenient excuse handed out to me in a silver platter. Finally, I had an alibi.

“I guess?” I replied, feigning ignorance.

Nogisa asked for a bit of rice cake from one of the servants. But before she could savor her meal, the king arrived.

I could not help but admire the king as I watched him enter the hall. He was a brilliant middle-aged man standing proud and tall amongst his attendants—the complete opposite of his son who lost his life because of his carelessness.

Meeting Prince Adrian made me think that perhaps over the centuries that I remained asleep in my sheath, my old friend’s bloodline was watered down until the mighty lion became a shriveling cat. But the king in front of me seemed to have no shortage of the charisma and dignity needed to lead an entire nation.

“You look much better than I heard,” the king said, his words heavy with affection for a son he almost lost.

“You didn’t even say hello to your father,” he continued, “I thought you were going to die.”

“Your Majesty, it seems Prince Adrian has lost his memory due to the accident,” Nogisa replied for me.

The king turned his head to me, waiting for confirmation. I nodded.

“Oh my god! How could this be?” The king exclaimed, losing a bit of his composure “Why wasn’t I informed immediately? Call the physicians to figure out how to remedy this!”

Ui-Yu arrived at a moment’s notice.

“I cannot find any abnormality in His Highness’s head,” Ui-Yu reports, “the temporary memory loss may be due to mental shock.”

“A memory loss…” the king’s words rolled over his tongue, his eyes staring at me. It was almost as if he could tell that these cold eyes weren’t his poor son’s, but rather someone else’s.

The longer he stared, the more I was sure he noticed. I was nervous, and a part of me was waiting for him to scream, 'who the hell are you, and where is my son?!'.

But he didn't. There was no longer doubt in his eyes, only a tinge of anger.

"Sometimes, we can make the wrong choices. Sometimes, we behave extremely. But there is something to learn in all of this. What's important is that we do not repeat the same mistakes." The king said.

Suddenly, his anger in his voice grew more potent, "But you seem to have forgotten all of that. Since the incident, you have not taken a single step forward from your last mistake."

His words, though deep, sounded more like a rant than a reproach.

"Your Majesty, please calm down," urges the others in the room.

The king quieted, but the coldness did not leave his eyes.

After the king's litany, I thought that the entire palace would despise me as the prodigal prince who does nothing but bring shame to his glorious father, but it turned out they were quite hospitable. But it still cannot be denied that some look at me with contempt. Living in a prince's body isn't as easy as I thought it would be.

Before leaving, the king fixed his eyes on me one last time, perhaps trying to get one last chance to find the missing piece to prove that the person in front of him is no longer his son.

All I could do was sigh in relief the moment he and his escorts have left the room. It was Nogisa's turn again this time to pierce me with her scrutinizing gaze before taking her leave.

The queen arrived shortly.

"I heard of your condition on the way," she said, "I understand if you feel a bit confused right now."

Unlike the king who confronted my situation with anger, she met me with tears.

"Your memories will be back soon," she says in a warm tone, "it would be a serious

issue if you don't remember anything of the past."

After all of the contempt I faced today, her gentleness took me aback. It made me uncomfortable knowing I was the weapon that ended her son's life and why she is in the position she is now—that and the fact that I was too old to be pampered like this. I shut my mouth and continued listening to her.

The sun had already set when the long dialogue with the queen ended. It was only then that I had the time to work on my real goal—mana development.

"Well, this fat is going to be a huge problem," I tell myself.

Already, my first hurdle is a big one. No matter how hard I tried, this body would not accept mana. I had no choice but to accept the fact that I must first fix this body's inferior qualities before it could ever be ready to accept mana.

"I wish I had my own body," I can't help but murmur to myself. As far as mana was concerned, an impossibility.

Losing my original body was a tragedy. All the mana I had been steadily accumulating for hundreds of years are gone and vanished into oblivion. The day went on with more futile attempts at absorbing mana.

"Your Highness, the queen, has sent special food to replenish Your Highness' strength," the servant said.

The 'Boyangsik' sent by the queen was like rain to a famished land. It contained a surprising amount of refined and pure mana.

"I can assist His Highness if he pleases," the servant said, embarrassed. She was worried that I could not or would not take the food.

Of course, I have every bit of intention of eating it. Without waiting for another word, I took the plate from her hand and ate every last bit. I dismissed her shortly after, eager to be left alone so that I could examine my mana.

I could feel the mana that swirled around me. I did not hesitate to pull them into a single place, on my left chest, where my heart resided. But just like before, most of the mana refused to settle on this body. They dissipated away into the air. However, forcibly holding the mana that has already entered this body was not a difficult task.

What little mana I was able to gather settled in the body. But it was still not enough, and even it would be scattered again after a day. Still, mana is mana, no matter how little.

I called the servant once more and asked her for more of the food she delivered a while ago. Her eyes opened wide at my request.

* * *

I ate several servings of the food sent by the queen. Thanks to that, my mana collection drastically improved, and I finally collected enough mana to forge a new mana heart.

I quickly instructed the servant not to let anyone enter my room without my permission. I have to be left entirely alone so that I could concentrate on forging a new mana heart.

After hundreds of years of forging mana heart, one would assume it would be a simple task for a veteran like me. Probably something I should be able to do even with my eyes closed. But apparently, this is a different story altogether.

"Agh!" I screamed at the sudden pain in my chest. When mana falters during the creation of a mana heart, the area where the mana would jump to would feel terrible pain.

The pain caused by the mana fluctuation hurt, but not so much as the pain caused by embarrassment. This was the first time I ever failed to make a mana heart.

'Ah! I think it's on fire!'

'I think my chest is going to burst!'

In my head, I could hear the screams of the former champions who wielded me in battle—everyone who forced me to make mana hearts. Forging mana hearts had been painful for them, too, I realized. I overlooked this before when I was a sword because I had no human body to register pain. I had no blood to shed, no tears to cry, nor pain to feel at that time.

'Stop it!' I told myself. I need to concentrate. Unlike my previous owners who had me to help them control mana, I have no one. If I were to lose my mind doing this, mana would reflux, and the consequences would be dire.

With every ounce of my being, I desperately clung into every single speck of mana in

my body until I eventually succeeded at forging a new mana heart.

“I did it!” Despite making countless mana hearts before, this made me cheer with satisfaction. I made this one for me, and me alone. The idea of making something my own after centuries being treated as a possession felt surreal.

『Mana Heart was successfully created.』 a dream-like voice whispered.

Just hearing those worlds doubled my satisfaction. However, this satisfaction was short-lived as soon as I realized that it was a status message just like all the others I sent my former masters when I was still a sword.

『Resting the connection with the root source.』

“Wait, what?” confusion surrounded me as the new message came out of nowhere.

『The connection has been restored. However, the connection is not good.』

『The connection is volatile. 』

『Most powers are unusable.』

『Only some powers are currently accessible.』

CHAPTER 3
PRINCE OF MANGANI (3)

The message did not linger long enough for me to organize my thoughts.

『Judgment can be used limitedly.』

“If my opponent is equal or lesser than me, I could confirm their power level,” I tell myself, “Hey! Wait! What are you?”

But the voice didn’t answer me. It went on with its announcements, as though it did not hear me.

『Third Eye can be used very limitedly.』

『Vision is improved.』

『Third Ear can be used very limitedly.』

『Hearing is improved.』

“What is this…” was all I could say as the weight of all these manages to pile up into one big confusion.

Even long after I received the last message, the words still lingered in my mind. I still could not wrap my head around everything that has happened so far in such little time. But using the actual skills I unlocked wasn’t very difficult.

“In… sounds… words… I can’t go in?”

“…I don’t know his personality… I went… I can’t be safe…”

Though not as clear and perfect as my original ability, Third Ears still improved my hearing enough to catch the ladies’ faint whispers outside my room. Third Eyes also allowed me to see the world in sharper details than most human eyes.

“Haha!” Excitement replaced confusion as new possibilities opened for me now that I have reacquired some of my powers.

“…That… Ugh, loss…”

“…Until irresponsible… People who suffered… He can’t sleep…?”

“…I don’t know about it… Ground… bottle… Many people…”

“Ugh”, I suddenly felt exhausted after using Third Ear to listen to the ladies talking outside my door. I grabbed my head to soothe the pain that came with exhaustion.

『All of the mana in the body has been exhausted. The use of power has been forcibly stopped.』

The dream-like voice appeared again and informed me of my condition. Only then did I understand what “can be used very limitedly” meant. This limit is such a foreign experience to me after all the centuries I spent as a sword with near limitless power. My current ability to recognize my immediate surroundings is a far cry from my former ability to overhear sounds and see objects from a far distance with precise details.

First, I have to grow a mana vessel if I want to reclaim the full glory of my powers. Considering the abilities I unlocked after making a mana heart, I’m sure increasing the amount of mana in this body would result in more of my powers returning to me.

I was just about ready to restart the process of accumulating mana when a grumbling sound from my stomach broke my focus. I have nearly forgotten that human bodies consume energy in a way swords don’t. Perhaps the creation of the mana heart drained this body, and now it requires more food to replenish its strength.

Unable to bear the hunger any further, I called in the servant.

“Your Highness?” asked the servant.

“I’m hungry.” A short declaration of an order to bring me food.

The girl’s eyes flickered to the window where the moon hung in the night sky. Now was not the right time for a late-night snack.

“I’ll get you something, Your Highness.”

Being a prince meant servants have to follow your orders despite what their instincts might say. Now might be the one time this princely body worked in favor of him today.

* * *

I devoted the next few days to fill my heart with mana. Giving up because of the poor qualities of this body was not an option for me. Today, a visitor came while I was working on mana.

“Your Highness, I am your new escort sent by His Majesty,” said the handsome young man in golden armor. The royal coat of arms on his chest gave away his identity without being asked—he was a royal knight that served directly under the king.

“Where was the old escort?” I asked. He does not look familiar, and I don’t remember seeing him when Prince Adrian first claimed the sword.

“Everyone has been removed.” He replied, his tone flat and formal.

I pursed my lips at his reply. Young men join the Knights of the court with big dreams. Often, they had to sacrifice a lot to get a chance at being accepted, and to be admitted into the knight’s service is a dream come true. But it seems that they got kicked out of the palace before they could even spread their wings because of the prince’s terrible accident. It wasn’t only Adrian’s life and future that were lost that day.

Losing my powers came at the price of getting a new body, but all those young and promising knights who lost their future that day lost everything and gained nothing.

“If you need anything, please call me,” he said. The new escort briefly greeted me and left. Already I can tell he is a faithful and sincere man.

“Wait,” I stopped him from leaving the room just long enough for me to use Judgement. I felt it was necessary to know him better since he will be my escort moving forward.

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□ Carls Ulrich [Male, 24 years old]

□ Aptitude. [N/A]

□ Characteristics. [N/A]

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Like my Third Ear and Third Eye ability, Judgment is also not as potent as it used to be. The only bits of information I managed to gather were his name and age. Judgment being "limited" prevents me from knowing my target's aptitude and characteristics until I find a way to level up my powers.

"What can I do for you, Your Highness?" he responds.

"Nothing, you may go now," I made a rough gesture giving him the go signal to leave.

Just when I thought I would finally be alone again to go back to my mana training, another visitor popped up. This time it was the queen.

"I took all the medicine you sent, mother", I said politely.

Her face was painted all over with delight at hearing those words. Something tells me she half expected me to throw away all of the concoctions she had prepared.

The door opened, and an old man entered. From the looks of things, it seems that he had been waiting outside this entire time.

"Do you remember him?" The queen asked.

I fixed my eyes carefully at him, pretending that I was trying my best to recall who he is even if I honestly have no idea. After what seemed like enough time, I shook my head as a final answer.

The queen sighed.

"Do you see? My child has become… this," the queen said to the old man.

"I must confess," the old man began, "I thought it was only a rumor that he lost his memory after the accident."

The old man was so outspoken, and his tone was fierce. It was evident he never liked the prince then or now.

"He's your only nephew," the queen said, revealing the man's identity as my uncle.

“I came here because I couldn’t refuse my sister’s request,” he says, eyes fixed on me, “what I can do is simply reduce that weight. Beyond that, I can’t do anything else.”

The queen bit her lips. She didn’t like having her worst suspicions confirmed.

“Even that much is incredible,” uncle says, trying sound positive, “don’t forget that now.”

With those words said, he walked out of the room just as fast as he appeared. Clearly, he wants nothing to do with me.

“Do not take your uncle’s words to heart,” the queen said, trying to reassure me.

I wanted to say many things, but I stayed silent. The prince’s relationship with his mother was still something I haven’t fully understood yet.

“Take an effort to change the minds of others regarding you,” she said before rising from her seat and leaving.

Thump. The door closed and opened again, giving way for the uncle and housekeeper to enter.

“If you want me to treat you like a prince, give up now,” he said, his words sounding more like a threat than a warning. Uncle’s face slowly inched closer until it was close enough for me to feel his breath on my skin.

“I didn’t come here to suckle the prince,” he said, “I came here to kick my ugly nephew’s butt.”

He was a pretty honest man with his feelings. He soon delivered on that promise as he kicked my ass then and there.

“From now on, eating, drinking, and breathing will all require my permission,” he warned before leaving.

The next day, I was already at the training ground in the first royal palace corner when I woke up.

“What is going on?” I had many questions on my mind, one of which is how did I even get here?

Uncle laughed, not the kind of laugh you would hear from old people; it was more like a ferocious cackle from a bitter wolf.

“You know what? I changed my mind, and I’m going to teach you a bit of our family’s visionary fencing.”

It would’ve been a child’s play in my other life, but this body, with its inadequacies, is another story. I could only fake a faint smile in response to his challenge.

“It’s a bit embarrassing to see your fat jiggle,” he quips.

My face must not have been very well suited for expressing delicate emotions because the old man quickly burst out laughing.

“Your face is so soft,” he jests.

This time I forcibly calmed my emotions and arranged my thoughts. I wasn’t going to give uncle the upper hand this time. Besides, I could use this opportunity to train this body. While I’m not too fond of his attitude, I have to agree that this bloated body is indeed troublesome. Even just a little movement is enough to fill my breath to the end of my chin. The sound of breathing each time I pant makes me feel bad. Not only that, but I also sweat so much that no matter how many times I changed my clothes, they still get drenched quickly.

Training this body to become fit was not a bad idea. The problem was my pride. I don’t particularly appreciate how uncle looks at me. This wasn’t what I had hoped to be, and his condescending attitude towards the fact that I am still alive does not help at all.

“Uncle,” I began, in an awkward tone I quickly regretted, “let us bet.”

Uncle raised his chin instead of answering. It was hard reading his expression, but it was clear that there is a hint of curiosity hiding behind his eyes.

“Within half a year, you will make me give up,” I continued before he loses interest at my wager.

“What if you can’t?” He asks, almost sneering.

“I will do what you say, uncle,” the only offer that will ever be enough to tempt him to agree.

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

Uncle chuckled with satisfaction thinking he had already won before the wager even began. It was the first truly happy face he had ever shown in the limited time I have gotten to know him. He is a twisted man for getting riled up at the thought of seeing his nephew broken, defeated, and submissive to his will.

“And what happens if you somehow win?” He asks, laughing at the possibility.

“In that case, you must fulfill my wishes.” I smile, returning the same ferocious smile he threw at me earlier.

Uncle studied my face for a moment. He was probably wondering where I get all of this confidence at winning.

“Good. It will be fun. I would have something to enjoy,” he says.

And with that, the wager began. I started running. I devoted myself to burning the fat off my whole body.

“Wait,” uncle grabbed my wrist.

In that brief connection, I felt energy flow through my body through my wrist, where he held me. I did not resist; instead, I activated my second mana heart.

“Are you making mana hearts?” He asked, perplexed and bewildered at the thought of his fat and useless nephew doing something so utterly inconceivable for a person like him.

But this confusion was soon replaced by laughter as uncle used it as another excuse for an ill-timed jest.

“I would never have imagined you were capable of achieving anything,” he says, “I feel like you made a bet just because you managed to make a mana heart.”

“Some time ago, I managed to make it,” I say, looking straight at uncle and cutting him off from another jest. I was so excited to show him that this is not the same nephew he could kick down on the ground.

“Where did you even learn how to make mana hearts anyway?”

His expression wasn’t something I expected. He does not seem to be the type to be surprised by small achievements. He does not even seem worried about his odds at winning our wager.

He was staring at me; his intentions still unclear.

“Never mind that,” he says, “I don’t get the point of making mana hearts.”

Despite being having lived for centuries as a formidable sword, I still felt embarrassed at his reprimand.

“Look at you,” he continues, “you don’t even know that it was wrong.”

His statement caught me off guard. Making mana hearts was something to be celebrated, not rebuked. That was what I have always known. It was common sense.

“It’s a low-level skill for low-raking mercenaries,” he says.

That single statement from uncle utterly degraded me.

CHAPTER 4
THERE IS ALSO A CLASS DIFFERENCE IN THE 5TH TRADITION (1)

“No one is acquainted with such outdated techniques anymore,” uncle said.

“They how do you store mana in your body?” I asked with curiosity. What he said does not make sense. “If a knight does not need a mana heart, then what is mana’s point in our body? It’s not like you can make mana rings like a wizard.”

“We do,” he said without looking at me.

“What?”

“The knights use mana by weaving rings like wizards,” he says.

I found myself laughing at this remark the same way he laughed at me after finding out about my mana heart.

“It wasn’t a story for you to laugh at,” he said rather defensively.

The mood suddenly shifted. It was as if a child changed the world’s most precious heirloom into candy and bragged about it. He looked a tad bit confused, his expressions not so clear, and his eyebrows were drawn together. It was then that I realized something wasn’t right.

* * *

During the time I spent as a sword sealed away in the royal palace, a lot had changed. Four hundred years was more than enough to change the world I had known into something so utterly strange and alien. All the common sense and systems I was familiar with no longer exist in this world.

There was once an old saying that knights crossed the realm of superhumans through mana hearts. And it was only 200 years ago when knights first discovered that they

could use mana more efficiently by connecting several rings instead of mana heart.

“Why?” I asked.

“It’s easier, quicker, more stable, and outright stronger,” uncle replied.

Even if I agree that the mana chain is more efficient, it doesn’t make sense to me that the entire notion of mana hearts no longer thrives. It was hard to accept this. In my time, a chosen few soared to superhuman status thanks to mana hearts. Their achievements were never trivial, and their stories were considered to be legendary. It’s unthinkable that the practice of making mana hearts had died while I was locked away in the palace.

“It was about 220 years ago that all the continent’s top two Sword Masters were dethroned by the knights who climbed using the power of the rings.” His tone was a little stern.

“What does that imply?” I asked.

“It simply means that there is nothing that makes no sense. Geomgi pulled out a ring that had the property of breaking the heart. No one has made mana hearts since then. Its concept died with this.” Uncle said, “it is about that time that famous martial arts scattered across the continent abandoned the tradition.”

“100 years ago, when Count Eli, who insisted on mana hearts until the bitter end, fell completely, mana hearts became a substandard tool used only by mercenaries,” uncle said, continuing his lecture.

Uncle clicked his tongue. He asked me why I bothered to learn such old-fashioned techniques as if he had seen through me, and as if he seemed to know what was going on in my head.

“How would I have known all of that!” I blurted out with frustration quite evident on my face.

“It’s strange, common senses is unknown,” he said, making a mockery of my ignorance.

Uncle’s face was awful, and I wasn’t very fond of him since we met. But now I know for sure that I dislike him with a burning passion.

To further prove his point about mana chains being superior, he handed me a book.

* * *

“The mana Chain Basic Theory,” written by Burno Bourdorf, the eighth successor of the 16th disciple Werner Rachel, the founder of the mana chain, Ernest Altringen, and compiled by Gregory Hessley

I surely did not like this book after reading its title, and I am equally sure I do not want to read it. But the curiosity of knowing what happened in the past 400 years that changed the system so drastically began to gnaw its way up, and I found myself opening the book.

From Sword Beginner to Runner to Expert and Master, the words of the knight I knew had become obsolete. The new age was full of unfamiliar concepts. “Circle” for wizards, “Chain” for knights, and the number of rings for dividing the status of knights.

“Single Chain”, “Double Chain”, “Triple Chain”, “Quad Chain”, and lastly, “Penta Chain”.

These foreign words were used to refer to the status of small knights. The knights that uncle mentioned who brought down the top 10 Sword Masters of the continent 220 years ago were only “Quad Chain”.

They weren’t even Penta. If not even the strongest of mana chain knights can bring down the strongest of those who trained using mana hearts, what more can their Penta Chain knights do?

I was so immensely proud of the mana heart inside my body. It was a feat that I had to struggle to accomplish using this new body. But now, it feels just like another useless lump in my body.

I can’t believe that just a few moments ago, I was so confident despite losing all of my powers in exchange for this fat prince’s body. But the knowledge of hundreds of years of the prosecution was nothing like the power I lost. That power was something I could take back with enough time. But this was a separate matter.

I was already skipping through the pages of the book. Some of the pages had turned yellow and had the characteristic odor that tells you that the book is old. Its pages were already fragile too. I continued to think while my right hand turned the pages.

「Basic concept of mana chain ductility」

The concept that utterly destroyed a legacy of my time was described as a recipe in a second cookbook. I could not stop myself from looking at it with contempt and hate.

“It’s not a bad trick, is it?” Uncle said, breaking my focus.

Just skimming through one book forced me to accept that Mana Chain had replaced Mana Heart. Mana Chains certainly had the potential. Nevertheless, I couldn’t help but laugh after I finished reading the book. My concerns no longer remained.”

“Altringen, Altringen,” I repeated like an incantation that would help me remember when and where I heard that name before.

I closed the book and examined the cover. The title on the time-worn cover was unnecessarily elaborate. One of the founders of the mana chain, “Ernest Altringen”. Somehow, the name was familiar.

A long time ago, there was a man who was neither a prosecutor nor a wizard, but a hybrid. He picked out a great sword, asking who would fit the name “Sword Castle”. He ended up devising a different technique to revolutionize the mana concept, and his last name was “Altringen”.

* * *

Uncle’s gaze was still the same the next day. He still begrudged every breath I take, and he made no efforts to hide it. He flaunted it like a medal of honor that separated him from those he deemed lesser men. Each time he pierces me with his gaze, I feel like he is looking at a prodigal son who ruined his future because of an irreversible mistake. It makes me wonder just what kind of other mistakes this prince had done in the past before he died.

A long time had passed before he talked to me again.

“Can you understand now?”

I nodded in response.

“Then you should know by now how foolish you were,” he said, his words teeming with sarcasm.

“I was impatient, but not foolish,” I said abruptly but with care so that he won’t notice my irritation. He looked sour, as usual.

His eyes stuck on me for a moment, reading me like a book with open secrets to exploit. Then, he asked, “you haven’t fully read the book, have you?”

“I read it. Many times,” I insisted.

“Then, you didn’t grab the meaning properly,” he retorted as if he was sure of it.

“I understood what I needed to understand,” I replied quickly.

Uncle took a step back, crossed his arms, and pierces his eyes straight into mine. I could not stare back, so I turned the other way, telling myself I didn’t need his approval.

“Okay, then. Enlighten us with what you have learned!” He jests, his mouth curling upward to emphasize his obvious distaste for his nephew.

“Mutual complementarity, rotation, and resonance between rings”, I said confidently. It was a summary of the mana chain softening method that I organized in my own words the night before.

“Hmmm!” was all uncle could say. I’m not sure if its another jest or the closest he could ever come to an approval. He turned his gaze towards the escort knights looking at me from a distance. “Well, it doesn’t matter. It’s all useless to you anyway.”

“Exactly. What should I do now? I don’t think I made a mistake.” Regret filled me the moment those words left my tongue. Uncle’s eyes bore through me as though it sees another fool.

“Isn’t there something you want to admit, or is it still unknown?” he asked. His voice was indifferent and showed no sign of concern. It proved how insignificant I was to him.

“No, both.” I laughed but quickly regretted it. Uncle did not answer. He met with a disapproving silence and star. His firm face tells me he didn’t like my laugh the same way he does not approve of anything I do.

* * *

Stupid! Bale Balahard clicked his tongue while staring at his nephew.

“What makes you think that you are special?” he quips.

His nephew did not answer, but Bale knew what was going on in his mind. “Some of the mercenaries are like you. They mistake themselves for being a hero like the ones they heard sung in songs of the past. They dwell in there, and this blinds them of their reality. Do you know how they all are?”

His nephew stayed silent. It was as if he had nothing left to say. “They couldn’t cross just two rings, and they all fell out.” Bale wanted his nephew to realize what a blunder he had made. He wanted him to learn from it and not just escape reality.

“As per your mother’s wish, I will guide you.” He admitted, but only because he didn’t want to make his sister sad.

He stretched his shoulders and straightened his back in a challenging manner. He looked like a giant every time he did this despite his age.

“I am Bale Balahard, commander of the Northern Third Corps, Captain of the Black Lancers and Count of the Kingdom, and a knight of four rings.” He was as fierce as the storm, and his voice had a tinge of pride in it. Visor! The court knights pulled their swords out all at once and pointed them at the uncle. He didn’t even blink.

“That’s the name of the one who stands behind you.” His nephew realized one of the names that symbolized his uncle. His eyes shone, and he tried to hide the bright smile that tried to spread across his face.

“You were an article in the Quad Chain.” His plump cheeks obscured his expression.

“Don’t make another noise.” Uncle was once again smiling.

CHAPTER 5
THERE IS ALSO A CLASS DIFFERENCE IN THE 5TH TRADITION (2)

Facing a real knight was never easy. Facing one after losing all the powers accumulated for four hundred years is an entirely different story.

The match against uncle was one-sided in his favor right from the get-go.

And if he didn't hold back for my sake and instead used his powers to their greatest extents, things would have been pretty bad for me.

But not only was my body hurt physically, my pride took a huge dent too because I knew that uncle already saw me as a weakling. Winning the match, or maybe even just doing a little better, could have helped change the perspective. I hate this sluggish body! My flesh jostled with every bit of movement, and this body moved like it had a mind of its own.

'Hundreds of years in vain… ' the simple truth that I find hard to swallow at the moment,

A quick blow knocked the wind out of my lungs even before I could get the chance to draw my sword.

"Again!" uncle was enjoying this a little too much.

I exhaled and tried to focus my mind.

'Quad Chain… ' Uncle's eyes were powerful and fierce, like a hurricane waiting to sweep through the land, leaving nothing but wreckage. And they resembled some of the beings I knew.

Sword Master.

A Sword Master is both feared and admired for the superhuman feats they can accomplish armed with nothing but a single sword. Uncle was like them, and yet he

wasn't. His powers stem from his four rings and not a mana heart.

"The world has definitely changed."

The sky was still the same shade of blue I saw from four hundred years ago, and yet not much of the world under it has remained the same.

"Your Highness!" A servant rushed to me while I was deep in thought. "The queen is on her way here!"

"What? Again?!" I cursed. Perhaps the news of the battle between the fat prince and the stalwart knight has already found its way into her chambers.

She arrived not a moment too soon.

"Ian! What happened here?" She asked my escort while her eyes remained fixed on me. Her gaze and the way she acts like a doting mother to a helpless child made me uncomfortable. If I could, I would avoid her as much as possible.

"He was basically begging me for a battle," uncle answered for my escort who was too stunned to utter even a single syllable.

"A battle?" She gasped and returned her gaze back to me. "This child? What do you mean?

"He wanted to test his skill."

The answer was simple, and yet the queen did not seem satisfied. Everything she knows about her son tells her this should have never been a possibility. And yet she was curious, almost dying, to learn more about the situation. But it seemed uncle was not interested in giving a recap of what happened.

"I'm afraid that you might hurt my child." The queen said.

'Uhm, he already did.'

"He's your blood, your own nephew." She continued, "I hope that you will not forget that."

If ever there was a force in this world that could match uncle's skill with the sword, it would be the queen's love for her son.

Uncle simply nodded and turned to me, “back to training.”

I guess even after the queen’s request not to get her son hurt, the real training was just about to start.

* * *

My breathing was steadily getting worse and worse, but my uncle does not seem to have any plans of letting up. But despite the toll on my body, my pride was still burning. It gave me the will to endure the harshness of the training.

“Stand up,” uncle commanded.

I tried to run, but my legs were too weak and flabby. I wobbled with every step until I eventually ended up rolling on the floor in exhaustion. With every fall, uncle kept forcing me to stand up and continue.

“What? Are you mad at me now?” I asked, although I was almost certain anyway that our disgust for each other was mutual.

“I’m just telling you what to do,” uncle replied without hesitation.

Watching him answer rhetorical questions that didn’t need any replies made me realize that his skill in the sword is matched only by his talent at provoking me. He tries so hard to pretend to be a much bigger man than he is. Outrageous.

“You thought you would be recognized for such ingenuity.”

“Double chain? Even a single chain win would have done the job.”

“If it is hard, give up. There will be no more trouble.”

He went on with his barrage of insults to further his point that I am weak and undeserving of his time and attention. I thought it would never end, but then he finally said:

“That’s it for today.”

Those words sounded so sweet to my broken body. As soon as the training stopped, I collapsed on the floor and rolled over in exhaustion. Lying there on the ground, I saw

the sky—the same blue sky of four hundred years ago.

In my peripheral vision, I could see uncle walking away without even saying any words of goodbye. I didn't need them anyway, and I have no intention of bidding him farewell as well. I was just glad that today's training was over, and I could finally give my body the time to rest and heal.

Rather than watching his detestable figure slowly vanish in the horizon, I forced my heavy body up.

I sat down, inhaled deeply, and held my breath. Air filled my lungs up to my chin before slowly coursing through my body. And then I exhaled all the air out before repeating the process again, this time I did it while slowly sucking the mana in the surroundings into my body.

I made my way to my quarters, thinking that my day was over, and I could finally rest in a real bed. But the day had other plans in store for me.

"Your Highness, I was waiting." A middle-aged man with a goatee was waiting at the door.

"What do you need?" I asked.

The stranger walked towards me and said, "let the god of faith examine His Highness' jade body."

His words and the aura he exudes tell me that he is a wizard. Perhaps one sent by the queen herself, for she couldn't stand to see his son beaten to a pulp.

I shook my head as a signal I'd rather be alone than deal with his spells, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. Blinding white light emanated from the palms of his hands.

"No!" I screamed, afraid of the spell he was concocting, and his still unclear intentions.

Surprised at my resistance, he took a step back. The light in his hands started to dim.

"Your Highness, you must be mistaken," he explained, "I was sent here to help you."

"It doesn't matter; I don't want it," I replied, "just stop."

“Perhaps His Highness still needs a bit of time to reconsider what he just said.”

“I know what I said,” I said, almost impatiently. “Just go, I don’t need your help.”

The wizard insisted that he was given direct orders by the queen to offer his assistance to me.

“I don’t care! Go!” I screamed, unfurling all the emotions I kept bottled up during the training and lashing them out at this helpless man who only wanted to help. I felt almost bad as he disappeared quickly, almost running away.

“Your Highness, why did you reject the healing magic?” Carls Ulrich, my escort, interrupted.

“Healing magic is poison to me,” I answered briefly without giving him further explanations. In truth, my overused muscles were torn and swollen. Healing magic would have completely restored them. But that would also make my hard work useless.

Carls stared at me with a look of surprise.

* * *

The next morning welcomed me with the site of uncle already waiting for me in the training area.

“I was told you met with the wizard of the royal palace.” He said as he eyed me from tip to toe. Confusion soon colored his face as he realized what happened during my brief encounter with the magic healer.

“Think again,” a short response to confirm what he already figured out by himself.

Uncle frowned, both at my eager response and the stupidity of my actions, at least by his standards of stupid.

“You weren’t healed.” He grunted, stating the voice.

I nodded, “receiving healing magic would have been the same as receiving poison.”

Uncle was stoic, unlike Carls, when I told him the same thing. He simply nodded.

“Like yesterday, run until I tell you to stop,” he commanded.

I gave no complaints and started running.

‘Stop. I’m going to die if this goes on’ I could already hear my beaten body begging for respite. My whole body screamed in pain with every step. Each foot that hits the ground sends pain all over my body.

But I endured. I had to be patient and strong. Or was pride the reason for not giving up? Regardless, I somehow lost weight in all of this.

“Stop,” Uncle said. This was something I had not expected to come from him so soon. I was prepared to go long lengths, knowing how much he enjoyed seeing me suffer. But he stopped the training anyway.

“I thought you would receive healing magic,” he said, too crude for an excuse and too stingy for an apology. “This is enough for today.”

He walked away after declaring the end of today’s training. The moment is figure disappeared from sight, my body, which was held up by the sheer power of my pride, collapsed into a pile of beaten flesh.

“I really am dying, am I?” I asked with my back on the ground, and my eyes fixed on the azure sky.

* * *

Life was the same the next day, and the day after that. I ran until uncle gave me permission to stop.

My body wasn’t given the luxury of time to heal from yesterday’s fatigue before being dumped into a new pool of stress and pain. My muscles were so bruised and sored that they throbbed with even just the tiniest of movements.

But just like yesterday and the day before that, I endured. I had not lived for four hundred years simply to submit to defeat today. After all, there wasn’t much I could do without first getting rid of this damn extra flesh.

Uncle was not much use either. He wouldn’t give me much of a break at all. He was too focused on controlling me thoroughly. Running, walking, and resting—everything began

and ended at the words of the housekeeper. My life was juggled and tossed around by the mere words of another.

My diet was also significantly changed. Meat and vegetables were served with no seasoning at all.

Uncle got himself involved in my whole life under the pretext of helping me reduce weight. However, there was one thing that the outspoken man would not dare touch—mana heart.

He tried to control every fiber of my being down to even the simplest actions, such as breathing. But he didn't care what I did with mana hearts. He simply pretended not to see.

Whether I insisted on collecting mana during the break or turning my mana back and forth to raise my worn-out body during training, he didn't care. It's as if the entire concept had no impact on his goals at all.

A week passed, and then a month.

"Well?" Uncle said. He was standing in the middle of the training area with something in his hand. As I got closer, I realized what it was—a wooden sword.

"You must be knowledgeable about how to handle a sword," he said as he raised the sword, his voice deeper than usual.

"The knights of the kingdom used wooden swords in the past when they lay the foundation," he explained. "I have no intention of repeating this lesson, so watch closely and listen to my instructions."

"Did you say that the kingdom's knights use these swords when they lay the foundation?" I asked.

"As a training sword, it lacks power. But since it is a sword used to learn the basics, it is not too bad." He replied.

I laughed involuntarily. He wanted to teach me, the former legendary sword of Dragon Slayer King, how to use a wooden sword.

"That's what people say about this sword," he said. He probably expected my reaction.

I know better than anyone about the sword they deemed trivial. It was one of the legacies I left behind a long time ago. Wooden swords that have once slain dragons are now treated as nothing more as training tools.

How funny.

CHAPTER 6
THERE IS ALSO A CLASS DIFFERENCE IN THE 5TH TRADITION (3)

The Dragon Sword that uncle showed me was not the same Dragon Sword I know.

It was nothing but a mere shell of a dragon sword's power.

In fact, from the beginning, I already knew why the Dragon Sword was treated like this insignificant training sword. The Dragon Sword lacked the will of a true dragon.

Maybe it was natural. This is a different time, after all. This was no longer the era when knights trained to develop their mana hearts. No, this was the era of the rings.

Damn mana chain.

To see others lose interest in mana heart is one thing, but to see the descendants of Leonberger abandon their faith in the mana heart over the mana chain is another story altogether.

But I guess the descendants of my friend is not the same as my friend. They inherited only his blood and kingdom, not his ability to discern the true worth of treasures. They chose differently, and this choice led to this moment where a fake dragon sword stood in front of me, wielded confidently by a man who knows nothing about the truth.

I inhaled and exhaled deeply to try and cool my head. But no matter what I do, there was no quelling the fire that burned in my heart. The man-made mana heart in me has been troubled after seeing its half—the dragon sword.

'It's fake. It's not your half.' I told my heart. I felt it sink as if it understood what I just said.

"…there is nothing more suitable for you who does not even know how to hold a sword."

It was only after he finished his sentence that I realized he had been giving me instructions while I was lost in my thoughts, trying to calm the heart that raged with fury inside of me.

“I don’t intend to pass on the family’s swordsmanship to you. If you want to learn, you need to find yourself your own teacher.”

He uttered more verses and phrases, but what struck me is that he said it was impossible to win a bet with a dragon sword alone.

“So—“

“I don’t need it all,” I said, cutting uncle’s words. This took uncle by surprise.

“I will not learn other swordsmanship,” I declared, “it is enough to win with this sword.”

Uncle clearly had a lot to say. But, as always, he stepped back and simply looked at me disappointingly.

“Do what you want,” he said, resignation and apathy swirling thickly in his voice. “We’ll keep doing basic strength training like before, and after that, we’ll work on the sword.”

Uncle adjusted my training schedule as if nothing happened.

A wooden sword practice was added to the list of my monotonous yet laborious physical routine. And from that day on, I began to learn with the fake dragon sword that was weakened and reduced to this insignificant form.

My heart wanted to have a real dragon sword to feel its power in my hand’s grip, but unfortunately, my current body could not handle the real thing yet.

This body was too fragile for a force so powerful. I didn’t want to risk my mana heart, as well. One wrong move and you could end up breaking it.

So, I forced myself to settle with practicing the fake dragon sword that the foreign minister showed. To be fair, uncle was incredibly good at training.

With a wooden sword, he demonstrated monotonous attacks and blocks, which I copied day after day. Meanwhile, my body was slowly changing. The muscles needed to wield a sword were slowly getting built.

Another month passed. After much hard work, I succeeded in changing my constitution.

『The High Obesity property has been changed to Normal Obesity. 』

『The metabolism becomes more active due to changes in the constitution.』

The message said.

I have become somewhat used to using this body through repeated rigorous training. This was the moment when two months' worth of hard work finally paid off, at least a little bit.

The change wasn't also just external. My Mana Response Disorder trait disappeared, and the General Mana Response Trait was developed after steadily accumulating mana.

However, these weren't enough to satisfy me. I still have a long way to go before I can truly say I have succeeded.

The succeeding exercises also changed in intensity to keep up with the progress I was making. After my daily routine with uncle, I would stay alone in the training area and continue. It was hard, but it was rewarding to see all of my sweat and effort starting to bear fruit.

That made me feel a sense of accomplishment I've never felt before. I was growing. Although the achievements were still insignificant, especially for uncle's standards, I have definitely come a long way since the day I first acquired this body.

My body was inspired, and my spirit was infinitely elevated, the more I practiced. This fueled me to keep working.

"…!"

I stepped in and out quickly, practicing my footwork and improving my agility.

"…!"

I swung my wooden sword as hard as I could against invisible enemies in the air.

"Stop!"

I was so concentrated at my task that I failed to notice someone was calling my attention until they finally grabbed.

“What are you doing outside?” uncle demanded. He was staring at me with a distorted face, the complete opposite usually stoic and apathetic face. It was an emotional expression that I had never seen before, especially not from him.

“What are you doing?!” Uncle said louder this time after I failed to answer the first time. He grabbed my hand with enough force to make me cry out in pain.

He turned my hand so that the palm was exposed. I then saw how badly damaged it was—torn, swollen, festered with boils close to bursting.

The sight of my bruised palm brought me back to my senses. I started to feel the rain that has been beating down on me for quite some time now. It was something I didn’t even notice earlier when I was still too lost in the momentum of my training.

“Stupid!” Uncle shouted, “Why are you training on a day like this?!”

I was confused. Yes, it’s raining, but it’s nice because it was cool, unlike the sun’s scorching touch. I nearly dismissed his antics as nothing more than another excuse to be mad at me, but then I noticed something else about the ground around me.

“Uhh…”

Black spots littered the space around me—spots that were not there earlier when I began my training. Black spots that could have only been the result of lightning hitting the ground.

I measured the distance between me and the closes black spot as the storm clouds above continued to roil.

Ten steps. I was only ten steps away from being a roasted pig. I tried to imagine the scene, then quickly shook off the terrible image. A few moments later, I heard another mental announcement at the back of my mind:

『Super-Intensive Concentration has been newly created.』

‘If you concentrate too hard, you will be hit by a thunderbolt‘, I thought.

“Training is over.” Uncle declared, and my crazy practice under the storm was forced to end.

I was on my way to my quarters when I met the wizard again.

“Your Highness,” he greeted courtly.

I nodded to return the greeting.

“Please allow me to aid you today, Your Highness.” He said, almost pleading.

“Be quick,” I said, surprising him.

He quickly got to work and created a flash of white light in his hands. He trembled slightly at the sight of my palms.

I just stood there as he meticulously tried to repair my palms, not knowing what to feel about the situation.

Hundreds of years ago, there weren’t many skilled wizards. In the Great War and in the endless violent battles that swept across the continent, it was always the wizards who fell first, and most of the surviving wizards suffered too greatly to ever be of much use.

The luxury of receiving healing magic was a near impossibility then, even for high-ranking commanders.

“Your Highness, please do not resist,” he pleaded as if he could read my troubled thoughts, “ease your mind.”

The wizard restored my palms and lightly healed the rest of my body. I felt light. I could feel my physical fatigue melting away like snow in the first morning of spring.

‘Uh, I could get used to this… ’

I couldn’t help but smile at the dull yet pleasant sense of being healed, the stark opposite of the pain-filled months I had to endure to train my body. But my moment of peace was suddenly interrupted when I noticed something odd from my escort.

Carls Ulrich was looking at me with a strange face. I turned to him and asked, “why?”

He didn't answer. He returned to his usual expressionless face as a royal knight and escort. After the treatment, he carefully led me to my room.

* * *

The day's near-death encounter with the thunderstorm made me look back on myself.

I couldn't say that I am perfect now. My spirit, who lived as a sword, and this weak prince's body had not yet found a compromise.

This weak body continues to drag my spirit back like a bothersome leash.

But earlier, under the storm cloud's wrath, this body rolled its limits. Everyone wants to break the boundaries of their strength, but transcending that barrier always comes at a price—a steep price I couldn't pay with my current body.

After seeing countless promising warriors meet their end like that, I never thought I would end up nearly committing the same mistakes. I have to refine my mind.

"Sir Balahard has asked me to tell you that training without his observation is strictly forbidden", a knight informed me.

Uncle was exactly as I expected.

"I'm going out for a walk," I said, excusing myself.

"I shall accompany you, Your Highness," the knight announced.

I left the room with the intention of going out for a walk so that I can work on my mana heart. But it seems the knight was instructed to observe closely should I disobey uncle's strict orders. I gave up on the walk quickly, knowing I'll achieve nothing out it.

I went back to my room and looked around the knights' blank and serious faces.

Haah. I exhaled. I promised myself that I would enjoy the luxuries I missed out on during the hundreds of years I spent locked away as a sword. But I forgot about this after I got too caught up in training and improving this body.

'Well, how about you start having fun?' I thought to myself.

I paced around the room, deep in thought about what to do. I was clueless about what "fun" means now. Then, I saw a bunch of people approaching from a distance.

"The Third Prince has arrived!" announced a servant.

It seems like I have a "brother". If he is called the Third Prince, then surely he is the brother of Prince Adrian. This also means that there are others.

"You look pretty good for a dead body," the younger prince said, his tone suggesting he didn't have a loving relationship with his brother.

But then he laughed, dispelling the seriousness of the air around us.

Oh. It must have been a joke. I think…

I belatedly laughed at his joke.

"I was so impressed with the legends that I tried to reproduce them myself," I joked, "but I was the dragon with the sword in its belly."

The Third Prince and I both laughed until he turned red.

"Thanks to me, the royal family's honor has fallen to the ground, but you can still laugh?" I asked him.

"It was a bit embarrassing but also funny," he answered, wiping a bit of tear from the corner of his eye.

"By the way," he added, "was it true that you made a bit against Sir Balahard?"

Gone was the laughter, as the Third Prince's expression turned serious.

CHAPTER 7
THE RUMORED GOURMET (1)

“So, is it true?” The Third Prince asked once more.

I shook my head nonchalantly as if it was of no great consequence.

“If it is, Sir Balahard is going to be in a heap of trouble,” the younger boy said with a gasp. “You can’t let a Knight Commander fight against the royal family!”

“So?”

“So that’s my say on the matter, Adrian.” He thought about it for a bit and then finally asked what he truly wanted to ask.

“Why don’t you fight me next?” I had expected this from one such as he. He pressed on.

“Firstly, I only have one ring, not two. That means that there will be no one harmed in the royal family. And no matter who wins or loses, it will look just like a friendly bout. I don’t think you can say much against my suggestion.” The impatience in his tone flowed out like a rapid-fire crossbow. I just rolled my eyes.

He acted as if there was a gourmet meal spread out before him and that he had to be the first to taste it all before it landed in someone else’s belly.

And in this instance, the fine banquet was me. I took in all in stride, though, for I could easily duel another prince.

It was a golden opportunity to increase my renown. I would surely look good, even if I were the fat and pudgy brother. Still, what cruel relationships the royals tended to have. I cared little; I looked forward to using my brother as the foundation upon which I would build my legacy.

“Think carefully about my challenge, Adrian.”

“Well, I’ll think on it,” my lukewarm answer came. He then continued to prattle on

about how we were the ideal opponents for one another.

“Be positive about all of this! I’ll wait for your answer,” the Third Prince said as he started to leave.

“What a pitiful display, how utterly pitiful,” I muttered under my breath as I shook my head.

“It is good that you gave him no clear answer,” a soft voice came from one side of the room. My knightly escort, Carls Ulrich, had spoken.

“Your Majesty, the Third Prince is renowned for being adept at swordplay since his early childhood. Rumor has it that he has even won recent bouts against knights.”

I considered this. My brother was about fourteen to fifteen, so his talent was extraordinary if he had already competed with knights. However, I knew he had not challenged me to test my skills. No, he merely wanted to gain more attention and having his uncle fight his elder brother was not a way for him to gain attention at all.

“By the way,” I said as I narrowed my eyes at Carls. “You are talking rather a lot today.”

He was a quiet man and had spoken more today than he had for entire months. He bowed his head in embarrassment.

“I apologize, Your Majesty.”

“Hmmm, yes. There is a great deal to apologize for.” I liked to tease the silent knight.

“Then I have said enough for today,” he replied as he once more embraced his quiet ways.

I had almost gone for a walk, then, but decided against it once I saw the overcast weather. On this day, the only thing that seemed a good idea was to return to my bed.

“Your Majesty,” a maid greeted as she offered something to me.

“What is this?”

“These letters have come for you, Your Majesty.”

She held a thick bundle of letters in her hands. I promptly unsealed one and scanned

its contents.

A brief summation followed:

“Please give me the opportunity to kick the princeling’s arse.”

Every letter had this same basic desire as its conclusion. The motives and justifications for the arse-kickings varied greatly, but ultimately the message was the same. It all seemed to be the result of me having challenged my uncle. Every person who bore me a grudge had now crawled out of the woodwork, intent upon settling scores.

Hah, look at all these damned letters.

“Write down each and every name of the persons who had sent me these letters,” I instructed the maid.

Such letters continued to pour in the next day and the day after that. All the messages had the same purpose: A whole bunch of folk wanted to beat me up, and now they had a legal way to do so. Oh, the motives varied greatly: Calls for justice, the settling of private grudges, simple curiosity… all of these baser emotions hidden behind frilly and courteous sentences. Even if the language of the missives was refined, this was, simply put, a great group of people who each begged me to fight against them.

“Truly, I am the most delicious of meals,” I mused to myself. The entire kingdom seemed to want to feast upon my bounteous offerings. So many were the letters that I had at last appointed maids to read them all. If the letters were challenges, they were to list down the names. After my instructions had been given, I turned my attention to more troubling things. These were the letters I had to privately open, letters sent by great lords of the land. The maids dared not touch their seals, much less read their contents.

I opened the letters myself but found the thread of them to be the same even if the language was even more imperious: “I want to kick your flabby arse.”

“Add their names, without exception.”

The people within the palace were very curious about what I was going to do with my large list. I had no intention of telling them.

They would know soon enough. Even while such letters kept me occupied within the

palace, I awaited my uncle's return and the re-commencement of our training sessions. Ten days later, he came to admonish me. I had made a mistake, so I did not argue with him; I merely listened.

Still, there was just so much I was willing to bear. I had no idea when the Count's nagging would end. If he went on like this, our training sessions would be nothing but him continuously pestering me.

"Uncle, will you stop scolding me before the sun has set? When will we practice?"

"Run! Run, boy, run!" He burst out, and I jumped into a sprint. My body felt lighter, and I knew my efforts had not been in vain. Still, I merely felt lighter; I was not yet light. I was no longer in [High Obesity], yet I was still like a rotund old man. I now possessed the [General Obesity] trait, and this was still fat.

Ah hell, when will I become a normal boy?

It did not take long for my body to become drenched in sweat. My uncle then threw a wooden sword at me, and I caught it, falling into the stance he had taught me as I started to practice my strikes. After a while, the Count raised his hand, calling me to a halt. I had trained for a shorter period than was usual.

"There are rumors circulating throughout the kingdom," he stated. I knew what he was talking about. The sweat streamed from my body in the morning haze.

"Perhaps now is the time for me to make my decision," my uncle continued.

"What decision?"

"Who you are to face in battle."

"Ah, that's a relief! If you just tell me the name now, I don't have to sort through all those blasted letters anymore."

He nodded, and this was the first time I had seen him openly agree with me.

"The decision is yours," he stated, and this greatly surprised me.

"Mine? Is that what you have decided, then?"

“I figured it was best for you to choose, as you’ll be the one competing.”

It would be a plausible statement under normal circumstances, but I knew the Count well by now. He had decided to do things this way because he figured it would annoy me more.

“If you wish, you can ask others for advice,” he added.

I laughed vainly, for I was used to being underestimated. Now, though, he had hurt my pride.

“If you need time, think about it for a few days, young Adrian.”

“No need uncle,” I stated confidently. “I have already decided.”

* * *

“What an excellent decision! You have made a fine choice!”

The First Prince was all smiles and glee as he approached me.

“You have made such a wise choice! This is so very unlike you, brother!” He continued to tease me.

“I may yet withdraw my decision.”

A momentary fear beset his face. “I will be sure to repay your choice, brother. Yes, I promise I’ll spare no expense when they fix your face. Still, are we not brothers, and this bout the natural way to go?” He hurriedly added, afraid that I would make good upon my threat.”

“It is true. We are brothers.”

“Yes, yes. So please give it your all. Choosing me was your best choice.”

This boy looked so silly. He truly seemed like an idiot who knew of nothing other than swords and swordplay. Has Gruhorn’s seed been so far corrupted?

I felt sad, then, for it seemed that Leonberger’s legacy had reached a dead end in this generation.

“My brother, your role is so important. You must not look too absurdly weak, then, because I’ll need to take care to act the part.”

I now realized that this Third Prince viewed me as naught but a bridesmaid.

“Okay then, do your best,” I replied loudly.

“Very nice, Adrian! Yes, very nice.”

I shook my head as I looked at his striking figure. He was fourteen, and even if he was trying hard to appear as an adult, the fact stood that he was still a child.

“Anyway, brother, there’s still plenty of time, so you have to devote yourself and get rid of that training sword. Learn to fight with a real sword…”

The people in this kingdom continued to ignore the legacy of the Dragon Sword. Along with Count Balahard, all the knights viewed it as a trivial training sword. Even those with Leonberger’s blood coursing through their veins did not hold it in great esteem.

“Brother?” The Third Prince’s voice prodded. He looked positively thrilled. “Anyway, I think it was a really good choice.”

How great were the treasures that these people have thrown out like trash?

I will have to remind them of their honored past.

CHAPTER 8
THE RUMORED GOURMET (2)

Contrary to popular belief, being a lady of the court was never a humble posting.

A court lady is a professional person, someone distinct from those maids who only conducted domestic chores. Their role more closely resembles that of an aide who assists in personal matters, even advising from time to time. Most of these women came from aristocrat families instead of being hired from among the commoners. It was not unusual for them to take great pride in their work.

Among their ranks, those serving in the royal palace where the proudest of them all. Being in a position to aid the royal family was a great honor.

However, not all the royal court ladies felt pride in their labors. Such was definitely the case among those who served the First Prince.

They would promptly describe him as the 'royal shame', and a 'little terror that could not be matched.' They decribed their jobs as 'hopeless toil without relief'.

These were insulting and vulgar words, possessing a terrible poignancy.

The reality was that their assessment was not false. Prince Adrian Leonberger was an outrageous mess.

Worse still, he was incapable of distinguishing a lady of the court from a common scullery maid.

Insults and verbal harassment was his daily routine. On occasion, if he found something not to be to his liking, he would hurl various objects at the ladies.

Due to such barbarities, none of the ladies of the royal palace liked the First Prince one bit. No, they all hated him as a vicious pig with pig-like manners and a plump, piggy face.

But one day, by some miracle, this sadistic and petty phase of his life changed. Though

his mannerisms had, on the whole, remained the same, Prince Adrian Leonberger had become an entirely different person. He stopped drinking, and he no longer insulted the ladies and the maids with vulgar utterances.

He also stopped throwing them with things.

No, the prince just stayed in the training hall all day long as he either wielded or wiped clean a wooden sword.

Musing upon this sudden change, some of the maids stated that he had died when he had fallen that day. Others rather posited that his new behavior was his plan for protecting himself from his father's wrath. The rumor then came into being that Count Bale Balahard had been summoned here exclusively to punish the prince through a harsh training regimen.

No one truly believed that the First Prince had repented his slothful and boorish ways. The maids especially believed this new phase to be but a temporary whim on his part. They stringently believed that he would embrace his old life soon enough once he tired of all the running and sword-swinging.

However, months had passed, and the prince still acted like a decent person, and he was utterly devoted to his training. It was all so very strange.

They saw it as an impossibility, for it was Adrian's nature to tire quickly of anything and give up its pursuit.

Then, one stormy knight, the maids overheard the knights gossiping about the First Prince.

"If I had to endure that guy for two entire months, it would be too much."

"Yes, the good days are gone now."

At first, the maids mused that Adrian had revealed his true colors once more. They were wrong. Surprisingly, these knights did not like the prince due to the fact that he was too keen on his training. It confused the ladies greatly. The sack of fat they knew the prince as would never train until his entire body hurt. The knights continued talking.

"Maybe the rumors about His Majesty the First Prince have been fabricated with

malicious intent."

"Yeah, they said this guy was lazy? Huh! Bloody liars."

The ladies could really not sympathize with such a statement. They sorely wished to correct the evaluations of these knights, who had only been posted in the palace for a scant few months. The ladies believed that these knights had formed their opinions far too soon.

A newer change had come to the prince, after some time. The letters started pouring in.

The letters came from everywhere and everyone, including several noblemen. All had expressed their intent of dueling the First Prince.

So too, the ladies received private gifts from the lords, begging them that their letters gain priority over those of others.

"We didn't even ask for gifts," they told one another, their confusion only mounting.

"Well, he has chosen his opponent, this should all end soon enough."

It was common knowledge that the First and Third Princes were to duel, so all the unsolicited attention would surely soon end.

That was until the rumors spread that the First Prince was seeking sparring partners…

* * *

Have three months truly passed? Bale Balahard frowned at the thought.

It had been more than two months since he had come to the palace upon his sister's request.

It was all taking longer than he had expected. He had at first believed that if he had made the training rough on the pretext of the boy having to lose weight, then his nephew would quickly have given up soon. The boy had even made a bet with him, but he didn't take that too seriously.

Yet now, on a day of pouring rain and great arcing thunderstorms, he watched as his nephew swung his sword about like a madman, right in the middle of the storm. The

prince had no awareness of being watched; no, he was focused on his strikes even as his torn hands were bleeding.

Count Balahard was now certain that his stay in the royal palace would be far longer than he planned for originally. It was an unpleasant eventuality, but not unbearable, for he was doing it considering his sister. If his nephew grew stronger, she would surely be able to sleep more comfortably.

Still, even if he would endure this unpleasantness, he found it difficult to bear the other nobles' attentions. They were, without doubt, discussing his nephew most intently. And naturally, whether to his peril or advantage, the name of Bale Balahard would be part of such discussions.

Politics were always complicated; he reminded himself. He looked down upon his nephew.

"So, you are going to be facing a single-chain knight?"

"You've stated that already, uncle. Stop repeating the same words over and over, it is a waste of breath."

Bale stared at his nephew, who regarded him without fear. This boy's potential fascinated him, yet he knew that Adrian would soon be disabused of his dreams.

It is unfair to the boy. He had only been trained for three months, and already he was to battle with a knight.

The lad hadn't even gotten rid of all his fat yet. Still, Bale did his best to act unconcerned as he spoke.

"If you ask me to furnish you with single-chain sparring partners, I will have to decline."

"No, I'm not going to ask you for that. I have already compiled my own list of single-chain knights who would come running to me if I but called out to them," came Adrian's swift reply.

"So, what are you trying to say?"

"That's all," his nephew said with a laugh. "They wanted to devour me. It will not be a healthy experience for them."

Truly, the First Prince tended to chat away without shame.

* * *

Not all the nobles who had sent their letters were double-chain knights; some still only had a single ring. Even so, they were quite confident that they would be able to beat up this one single idiot who still used Mana Hearts in this day and age.

I picked up the list of names and handed it to Carls Ulrich.

“Arrange these in order, from the weakest to the strongest,” I ordered.

He didn’t say anything and started organizing the list according to my demands.

“I can’t guarantee the credibility of the order of their strengths, based on rumors as it is,” he stated.

“Well, just do what you can,” I replied. Once Carls was done, I thanked and dismissed him.

I summoned one of the court ladies to me, then.

“Send letters to all the folk listed here,” I instructed as I handed the paper to her.

“What do you wish me to write, Your Majesty?”

“Tell them: You have been granted your opportunity. Come immediately.”

At this she remained silent, awaiting further orders.

“Do try to coordinate their arrival according to their order on the list. It would be difficult, having to face them all at once.”

She took my orders in stride and started to compose the letters. I had one more command before she left.

“I wish to have one on the third.”

* * *

I practiced with mounting dedication and fervor. I wielded my sword by day and built

up my mana at night, rarely sleeping. I knew I had to be one step ahead of the first opponent who arrived, whoever that might be. My Mana Heart shook my chest several times per day as it was tested to its limits.

I had doubts about its efficacy. It still tickled me, a sure sign that it was not fully prepared for what was to come.

Still, I continued to absorb mana into it.

Ten days passed in this manner, and then the first signs appeared.

A change had occurred in my body.

『[You have succeeded in collecting mana up to a certain level through constant effort]

[Your Mana Heart has expanded]

[Your body shape has slightly altered due to an extended Mana Heart]

[Your body can store a little more mana] 』

“Hah, it’s done!” I yelled with joy after having opened my eyes.

The first sparring partner arrived only three days later.

CHAPTER 9
THE RUMORED GOURMET (3)

Taylor Tailheim was the youngest son of a baron.

He possessed no great talent nor any pertinent connections. Taylor had only had a single Mana Ring on his chest. He was not someone who would normally have cause to visit the royal palace or the capital for that matter. Still, he had been invited, and he had come.

“It would have been nicer if it had been an honorable invitation, with the seal of the king,” he muttered to himself.

He did not appreciate that the seal upon the letter did not belong to His Majesty. Instead, the invitation had been sent by a prince commonly called ‘the shame of the royal court.’

He had been invited by the First Prince, Adrian Leonberger.

Taylor Tailheim did not once hesitate as he walked to the palace.

His tread was sure and strong, for he had a job to do. The royal palace came into sight. Well documented were the achievements of the Leonberger line, but Taylor found the heart of their kingdom to even more amazing.

The idiot within its walls, though…

At this thought, he increased his pace as his determination increased in turn. His resolution did not last long, for when strangers enter the halls of the great and gorgeous palace, they cannot help but be humbled and awed. When he had made his way to what was called the First Palace, he was completely enchanted by the scale and quality of the architecture.

What is this, just the First Prince’s palace?

He found himself in a training hall larger than his family’s entire barracks.

While awaiting the arrival of the First Prince, he heard voices echoing out from behind him. He turned and saw that a boy with a fleshy face was staring at him.

He does not look the part of a prince. No, he looks really squishy and plump.

The boy had arrogant features and a bloated body that could not be hidden, no matter the fine end expensive cut of his clothes. Taylor knew with one glance that this boy was the disgraced prince.

"Tailheim's youngest son, pay your respect to the First Prince!" A palace knight in golden armor announced loudly, startling Taylor.

"I, Taylor, youngest son of Baron Tailheim, greets Your Highness Adrian Leonberger," he said as he bowed, feigning the respect he did not feel.

"Huh. Yeah, okay," the prince responded bluntly, not giving the slightest of courtesies.

What an arrogant and vulgar boy! Whoo, man, this kid riles me up.

Taylor took a breath. He rolled his shoulders and extended his arms to relax his mind. A warning glance from the palace knight made him reconsider his actions; clearly, he could not move freely this close to the prince.

Be mindful.

Taylor shook his head as he recalled the bad blood between his family and this unruly prince.

A few years ago, at a banquet, the First Prince had insulted his father and elder brother. He had no reason to do so, as they had never met before.

Upon that day, his family's name had been dragged through the mud. His father and elder brother had become the laughingstock of the realm.

They were still being mocked up to this day. Taylor had come here to repay the insult that had been heaped upon his house.

He gulped hard as he imagined stabbing a knife into the plump heart of the prince, yet his murderous thoughts were interrupted by a booming voice that echoed through the hall.

“Calm yourself, young man. The sparring hasn’t even begun!”

It was the most famed knight in the kingdom, Count Bale Balahard. Taylor immediately bowed to the great man.

“I, Taylor, youngest son of Baron Tailheim, greets Count Balahard, head of the Balahard family, commander of the Third Legion and Knight of the Quad-Chain! It is a great honor to meet you, my lord.”

“Nice to meet you as well, Taylor.”

It was a brief greeting, yet Taylor was far more honored by the respectable knight’s greeting than that of the prince. He stared at Count Balahard, for he had always looked up at this man as one of his heroes.

“Hah, look at that. You look at him like a young maid looks at a king!” The prince had shot out this remark all of a sudden, and Taylor’s joy at meeting the great knight had quickly been ruined. Count Balahard greeted his nephew coldly and then once more turned to Taylor.

“Do you require some time to rest yourself?”

The young knight shook his head. “I warmed up just by walking here.”

“Then, can we start right away?”

Upon hearing the Count’s words, the palace knights took up their position all along the hall’s walls, clearing a sparring space in the center.

“Don’t ask me,” Adrian grumbled as he headed to one side of the room. Taylor faced him from the opposite side.

The knights brought each of them their swords. As Taylor saw that the rotund prince would be fighting with a training sword, he chuckled internally.

He cannot hope to beat me with a wooden sword! If I do this right and proper, my family’s honor will be avenged!

Taylor breathed deeply and then announced himself, as was the custom for those who lived by the sword.

“I am Taylor, youngest son of House Tailheim. I am a single-chain apprentice knight. I fight with the sword of House Tailheim.”

“Ha ha ha! This isn’t even a duel and you’re talking so grandly. This is killing me, ha ha ha.”

The First Prince seemed to have not an ounce of respect or courtesy within him. Even if this annoyed Taylor, he had to follow the tradition even if his opponent did not.

“I will fight with honor. I beseech you to do the same.”

“So, let’s just get started already,” said Adrian, idling about as if all this had bored him greatly.

Count Balahard made the formal declaration.

“Begin!”

Upon hearing these words, Taylor had immediately spun up the mana ring in the center of his chest. He felt vitality spread all over his body as the tension in his stiff muscles was swiftly eased. All that remained was his sense of duty, which impelled him to avenge the insult done to his family’s name.

He smirked.

“Then I’ll go first. Please be careful,” Taylor declared and rushed into an attack. The distance between him and Adrian narrowed in an instant.

You fat boy, I’ll teach you to be afraid.

As he charged, he channeled enough mana into his blade to cause grievous harm. He suspected that the frightened prince would immediately give up. He grinned as he imagined the plump princeling bawling and shouting for aid.

Taylor struck.

“Huh?” Taylor Tailheim was greatly confused, for the prince stood before him, having blocked his blade with a vertical parry.

“Is that the power of a single Mana Ring? Seems a bit sloppy to me,” the annoying voice

said from that plump face.

Taylor took a step back, not fully comprehending what had just occurred. He had channeled a lot of mana from his ring and into his sword. It should have been simplicity itself to defeat the prince in but a single strike. He knew that the prince had only started training but a few months ago.

Yet his strike had so easily been blocked. By a training sword, nonetheless!

Taylor could not understand any of it.

“Uh, how did you block that?” He asked, and the prince laughed.

“Well…” Adrian swung his sword around, his face filled with his usual arrogance.

‘Vsoooo… Vsooo… Vsoooo… ’

The prince’s sword was making strange sounds as it was swung about. These were the sounds of a sword almost swimming in magical energies.

* * *

The palace knights who had seen Taylor Tailheim launch his attack had been worried. They had almost jumped into the fight to prevent such a powerful strike from hitting the prince. Before they could act, though, the attack had landed.

Everyone had expected Adrian to come crashing down upon the floor. They knew that only a sword channeling mana could block a sword that did likewise. There was no way the prince could have stopped that blade, having trained for only two months.

The expected did not occur, however. Adrian had not even stepped back. He had stood fast and easily blocked Taylor’s swing.

Had Taylor dispelled his mana at the last moment?

The palace knights looked at one another in confusion.

They could see Taylor was similarly confused, which meant that the young knight had not removed the mana from his blade.

'Vsoooo… Vsooo… Vsoooo… '

Upon hearing that sound, the knights realized what had happened. Mana was flowing through the prince's wooden sword.

The room echoed with collective sighs of understanding and surprise.

Such a technique should have been too complex for the prince to employ, given the scant amount of time he had been practicing for. The palace knights began to whisper among themselves.

"His Highness must have been hiding such qualities all this time."

"Why does the world not know that this guy has such skill?"

They then lamented that people would have shown more respect to the First Prince if the realm had known of this earlier.

It was a pity; they all agreed on this.

"Hyaa! Hiyaa!"

The Tailheim boy had recovered and immediately started to slash and strike at the prince with his well-honed sword. The knights had admired Adrian's achievement, yet not one of them thought that the prince could withstand this onslaught. Once more, their expectations were dashed. Each and every time that Taylor swung his blade, it met nothing but empty air or the floor of the training hall.

The Baron's son's anger increased exponentially, the young knight now attacking as if his pride had been greatly hurt. Suddenly, Adrian shook as if he was tired of parrying and dodging the strikes. The palace knights made themselves ready to intervene in the fight.

"Stop." Count Balahard had read their intentions and restrained them with but a word.

"Hold your posts. Look at his face."

As one, the knights turned to look at the prince's face.

"Do you still see a child in peril?" The Count asked.

The knights could not answer, for the prince was smiling. The pain they had imagined upon his face had turned out to be an excited grin.

* * *

Whenever his blade slammed into my sword, I was shaken to the pit of my stomach. I felt like a bloated tick, and this was a sure sign that I had absorbed far too much mana. All of it sloshed about in my stomach, and if that organ could hold it any more, I would have to vomit it out – your typical mana regurgitation technique. I knew that the vomiting of blood would follow after such a measure.

Nevertheless, my body shook as I laughed. My foe's face was distorted like that of a demon. His face showed his helplessness but also a strange willingness to face self-destruction. The resentment that he had kept hidden was now openly revealed. This knight made no secret of his hatred toward me.

"Did you say you were Baron Tailheim's youngest?" I asked between one of his strikes.

He gave no answer as he stabbed his blade out toward me.

"You have to cool your head," I told him with a chuckle after I had dodged his thrust.

He seemed to be so far down the road of anger that he did not hear my words. As I took in the desperation on his face, I decided to free something that had slumbered within me. It was a part of my soul that I have never revealed, for this weak body had not been able to bear it.

『

[Your Mana Heart has allowed for a great influx of willpower]

[A single color has been overlaid upon the previously blank Mana Heart]

[The will of the slumbering dragon has been awakened]

[The heart of the dragon slayer has been activated]

』

I recalled the battle with the dragon and infused that memory into my Mana Heart.

The essence that was activated through this was powerful enough to slay a dragon.

『[The energies from the Mana Heart had been merged with the Dragon Slayer's sword] 』

This sword had been crafted to slay dragons yet had become dulled by misuse. It now cried out like a ravening beast after its centuries of slumber.

The way it moved and sounded as it cut through the air was clearly different than that of a mere training sword.

"What…"

My opponent's momentum was interrupted as this new energy flowed into my sword.

I swung at him. Our two swords clashed against one another. His weak Mana Ring shattered uselessly against the strong will that now expressed itself through my wooden weapon.

At that moment, the sword of the dragon slayer ate the sword of the apprentice knight. The well-forged steel broke in half under the impact of my strike.

Yet, my sword hungered still.

I pressed on, if only to sate its appetite.

CHAPTER 10
THE RUMORED GOURMET (4)

When the First Prince was greatly inundated with his new power, his body went sprawling as Bale Balahard finally managed to strike him down. He fell at a bad angle as his body rolled over a few times.

“Your Highness!” The palace knights shouted. They then turned to Count Balahard, half of them drawing their swords as they surrounded him.

“Count Balahard! Why have you done such a thing?”

The Count did not seem to be bothered by their threats. He instead stared at his nephew, who was writhing in pain. He recalled the conversation they had held yesterday very well.

“You wish for me to intervene? I am the commander of the Third Legion and a quad-chain knight. Why would I do such a thing?”

“Interfere if it happens, and only if it does,” Adrian had rashly replied.

“If what happens, boy?”

“Please stop me if you think I am going to kill him. You are my uncle, you should be able to do it.”

It had been three months since his nephew had started exercising and barely two months since he had started training with a sword. And then it had been a mere training sword the boy had swung about. He had listened to his nephew then and believed the child to be overconfident.

What did I say to him then?

“Do not get beaten up too much, and never cry.”

He had no fear of the prince then; he had merely laughed at the boy’s audacity. Yet

now, the unthinkable had occurred. He had tried to push his nephew away, yet the prince had started to strike at the Count then. That was a terrible decision to make. Bale had blocked the attack and responded with a strong counter. He had funneled great strength into that one blow so that it would not have to be repeated twice or even thrice.

The Count stared at his sword, which still brightly pulsed as it vibrated with the energies coursing through it.

“Two rings,” Bale muttered, for he had activated two of them to counter the prince’s own mana-infused sword. The Count tightened his grip on the hilt, and only then did the light fade from it as it ceased vibrating. Even more court knights had by now drawn their swords, intent on apprehending him.

“Count Balahard! Answer me! What you have done could be considered a grave crime against the royal family, even a treasonous act!”

“The prince had instructed me to do it,” Bale replied coolly.

“That sounds unreasonable! Why would His Highness…”

“Stop.”

The palace knights frowned upon hearing the First Prince’s command.

“Return to your posts,” Adrian ordered. “I did indeed ask him to do it.”

Bale watched then as his nephew vomited a torrent of blood onto his own forearm.

The boy’s face was contorted, his pain obviously immense.

Then, Adrian Leonberger fainted.

“Your Highness!” The knights shouted as they rushed to him.

“Don’t worry, this is normal,” Count instructed the worried knights. “This is mana regurgitation. He will wake up soon enough.”

“Uuuhm,” a faint voice murmured. Count Balahard turned and saw that it was Taylor.

“What happens to me, then?” The youngest son of Baron Tailheim asked, his face as pale as a pearl.

* * *

Once I woke up, the first thing I did was to study my Mana Heart. It had experienced many fluctuations as of late, yet it was now completely calm.

It was silently slumbering after it had raged so much.

Huh, I thought that it would explode!

I knew that it was the talk I had with my uncle that had saved me at the last moment. Had he not intervened, my Mana Heart could have broken after the great amount of mana I had absorbed and channeled.

However, I had just asked him to stop me. Not to knock me out. Anyway, he had prevented me from slaying my opponent, which was good.

And beside all of that, *I had won*.

The shocked face of the Tailheim boy as his sword was shattered swam through my mind.

It was such a delightful memory. Suddenly, my reveries were interrupted by a deep and booming voice.

“Why are you smiling, boy?” It was my uncle. I waited for him to apologize for knocking me out, but that didn’t happen.

“What have you done?” He asked me instead.

I frowned at the Count. “What do you mean?”

“Well, for someone with no actual experience to shatter a real sword like that…”

My uncle was a quad-chain knight and a sword master, so he precisely knew what he had seen. He had figured out that my sword was magical, even if he did not know it for the Dragon Sword of the legends.

“I had never taught you such techniques.”

“Have you even taught me something in the first place?” I joked, but the grim set of his face did not lighten an inch.

“What was that impure swordsmanship you employed, boy?”

“There was no impurity to it. No, I had merely been faithful to the soul of the sword.”

“So you believe the essence of such as sword is to cleave through flesh,” he stated, bringing his interrogation to an end. His statements surprised me, even though I knew from the start that using the Dragon Sword would heap many sermons upon me.

“It might be a crude and uncomfortable truth, yet the truth is the truth,” I told him. Swords were ultimately instruments of death. Some might say that it is an honorable thing to master the sword and so on and so forth. In the end, such prattlings were just big words. Swords were forged to kill.

“Some people might not agree with such a simple view on things,” I added. “I am a soldier, not a knight. I want to attain victory instead of being all prim and proper like.”

These words had little impact on my uncle.

“Well, Your Majesty, your sword’s power is unnatural. I had to fix your bloodthirsty attitude, even if it meant knocking you on your fat little arse. You will not be spoiled by me, I shall treat you like I treat my sons, or any obstinate child for that matter.” He got up from his seat as he said this.

He was right in his own way. I had to take control of the reins of the ravening Dragon Sword. Not controlling the weapon would lead to my ruination.

There was only one way; I knew this. Trial and error until I could control the thing. Even with the centuries of experience I possessed, my solution had to be approached from the viewpoint of the naive body I found myself in. But what choice did I have?

Even if I had the soul of a sword master, my body remained that of a fat kid.

“Your mother is deeply concerned for you,” my uncle said before leaving. “She does spoil you far too much. She has truly lost all her better qualities during her stay here.”

“You can now apologize for kno-” The door slammed behind the Count before I could even utter the rest of my demand.

Damned old man. Still, his attitude was the least of my concerns right now. I was mastering the way of the Dragon Sword. I cleared my thoughts.

My practice sessions would need to continue tomorrow, for I still had a long way ahead of me before I could tame this dragon.

Well, there was one comforting thing, at least. I had the list of future opponents in hand, and it was still brimming with names.

“Hm, now let’s see. Who’s the next one?

* * *

“What are you doing here?” After I had left the training hall, I had stumbled into Taylor Tailheim. “I thought you had left us already.”

“Ah, well, seeing as Your Highness had not said anything…”

Right, I had been knocked out without leaving instructions, which had caused the palace knights to detain the baron’s son.

“Well, they, and I, were afraid that if we misinterpreted Your Highness’ will, we would be punished.”

“No, no, well done by remaining here. Now I have someone to spar with until my next opponent arrives.”

The youngest son of Baron Tailheim trembled at my words.

I just laughed.

* * *

“You said you were named Taylor?”

The young Tailheim had suffered me for two more days. He was a completely different person since he had first entered the palace.

Before, he had been filled with hatred and had been on a quest for vengeance.

Now, he seemed as pathetic as a frog would seem before a snake.

“You have trained hard for three days,” I told him.

Taylor looked to the ground as if he was too tired to respond. I felt a bit remorseful, then, as I considered his pitiful state.

I had been wielding the Dragon Sword against him for two whole days. Each strike aimed to end his life, and he was forced to give his all to stop my attacks. When my power became too great, my uncle always stepped in. He was a bit more considerate, though, and made sure not to knock me out as he did on the first day. That was a fine state of affairs for me, not so much for Taylor.

“Really now, when are you going to apologize?” I asked the poor apprentice.

“What do you mean?”

“You wanted to kick my ass when you came in here. I’m a prince, you know.”

“I… That’s not…” Taylor’s face turned pale as he tried to stammer out an excuse. He came from a village in the countryside, so he could not hide his emotions all that well. I looked at him and raised my hand.

“Stop!”

He held his silence, bowing his head. These past three days had made him fear me to such an extent. I beckoned a maid over.

“Hand it to me.” She handed me a finely gilded box. I studied it for a few moments and then handed it to Taylor.

“This is for me, Your Highness?”

“I have done something that I should not have done.” I had heard the story of the First Prince’s behavior in Baron Tailheim’s court.

“I do not know whether this can rectify my insult, yet I wish for you to take it to your father, the baron.”

I really didn't care much about fixing all the fat little prince's mistakes, yet I believed that good work deserved a reward. Taylor had given his best these past three days. That is why I now gifted him with a lot of money. He wasn't able to kick my ass and avenge his family, yet he had been a useful sparring partner.

"There is a letter in the box which I have penned. I wish for your father to read it," I added.

"Handwritten letters…" The apprentice muttered. This son of a simple rural aristocrat looked touched.

My maids had written the letters in truth, but I saw no reason to tell him this.

"Go now, you have gone through much. Be safe upon the roads and arrive hale."

After saying this, I waved him away. The thrilled apprentice bowed as he retreated from me, screeching many times that it had been an honor to meet me and that he looked forward to the day when we would see each other once more. I just nodded, my mind already pondering my next opponent, who would arrive on the morrow.

I said goodbye to my uncle as well as we ended our training for the day.

He just stared at me, deep in his thoughts.

That man, and those piercing eyes of his…

I broke our staring contest and headed to my rooms.

* * *

Since then, several challengers had arrived at the palace. Each one of them was greatly determined to kick my ass until it was raw.

Unfortunately for them, not one of them got the chance.

"How… How?"

A man stared at me with a disheartened face. Had he been the seventh?

His face roiled with different emotions: His shame at being defeated by an obese

weakling battled with his amazement at having faced such skillful swordsmanship.

“Me and you, we have just been setting this table,” I grumbled at the man. “The rumor of the banquet has spread far and wide. Yet all who come to sup within my hall leave have left unsated.”

The dragon slayer’s will woke within me, and the Dragon Sword started to vibrate with mana as I stared at the helpless man.

“Only the strong can fill their stomachs at my table.”

CHAPTER 11
THERE IS NO DISTINCTION BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN (1)

Rumors had spread far and wide that the hated First Prince had started to spar against single-chain knights in the palace. It was well known that most of these challenges came from families that bore grudges against the prince. They had been given the perfect opportunity to settle their scores.

The common consensus was that Prince Adrian would pay for all his sins under the blades of apprentices and single-chain knights.

Yes, they knew that it was doubtful that the prince's life would be endangered, yet all believed the boy was in for a few good thrashings.

It was a well-known fact the prince couldn't wield a sword.

Excitement mounted among the rumor-mongers as they awaited news on the outcome of these matches. Still, despite their patience, no concrete facts reached their ears. Only the same old rumors that they had heard and spread countless times. One of these rumors was that the youngest son of Baron Tailheim had been chosen as the first sparring partner and that he had arrived at the palace.

Everyone knew that he wanted to avenge his family's sullied honor.

Still, nothing was heard on the results of the match. The same went for the match between the prince and the eldest son of a rural scholar. The scholar had been insulted at the palace. They knew well that this man would soundly drub the prince on behalf of his father and the nobility in general. Further adding to the confusion, nothing was heard of the apprentice knight who had entered the palace grounds, his eyes burning with an almost unearthly determination.

Silence reigned after the fourth match, and the fifth, and even after the seventh. Everyone knew that people entered the palace to spar with the fat little prince.

No news existed about what happened after that. People started to believe that the prince had ordered his rivals to be silenced after they beat him.

He would do anything, however depraved, to save face. Popular rumor also held that everyone who entered was immediately detained, for was the prince not a coward at heart?

So it came to be that a few people grew tired of mere rumors; their curiosity had become so great that they went out in search of Taylor Tailheim.

They wanted to know what had occurred during the first sparring match, at least. The answer he furnished them with surpassed even their wildest expectations.

“I believe him to be wildly misunderstood. The First Prince is not nearly as rotten as rumor makes him out to be,” Taylor told all the pilgrims who had knocked upon his door. Even when he was reminded about the misfortune that Prince Adrian had heaped upon his family, Taylor remained steadfast in his favorable attitude toward the prince.

“His Highness has explained quite eloquently that his past behavior has been but an unfortunate misunderstanding. My father has already accepted the prince’s explanation.”

“Yes, we see, but what has been the result of your sparring match?” the people asked him.

“I gave it my best, and that is all I have to say on the matter.”

And so the rumor seekers began to discuss Taylor Tailheim’s response to their questions earnestly. They concluded that the poor apprentice knight and his entire family must have been threatened to keep their mouths shut about the true nature of events. Or perhaps, he had been bribed from the royal coffers to not boast about his victory over the prince. Whatever the conclusion, everyone agreed: Something was very suspicious about the entire affair.

The other sparring partners that could be tracked down had also not given much detail about what had occurred in the palace walls; their answers only deepening the mystery.

“No, he didn’t threaten me. I just learned the true nature of His Highness, Prince Adrian.”

“Hah, no, the prince did not coerce me. We had a good fight and, well, that’s all. It was a bit off fun, really, no harm done.”

No one could believe such words, for shutting someone’s mouth if you had a royal army and a royal treasury backing you was not a difficult thing at all.

The only logical conclusion was that the royal family had stepped in to silence these sparring partners. When the partners themselves heard these rumors, they were greatly embarrassed. Not only were these lies, but they were lies that sullied both their and the prince’s honor.

* * *

“I silenced them? What do you mean, I silenced them?”

I found all of these rumors surrounding me absurd. Naturally, the people I had faced chose to remain mute upon the subject. They might have been brave enough to face my sword, but they were clearly not brave enough to admit that a rotund royal had so utterly bested them in combat.

Still, the conspiracy theories that I had the royal family step in to threaten or bribe these poor souls were even more outlandish.

“Heh heh!” My uncle chortled. “These nobles have nothing to do with their time. They always concern themselves with the affairs of others. This kingdom is bursting at the seams with people who waste their time by wondering about your every move, boy.”

“Really, these fools should be doing something productive, like I am.”

“You don’t say!” Count Balahard had found my statement to be outrageously amusing. It was only then that I remembered whose body I occupied, and this fact made me shut my mouth real quick. No one in the entire kingdom had lived a life as unproductive as that of Prince Adrian Leonberger. With this in mind, I turned to face my sparring partner, who was still resting.

“When you leave the palace, tell them the truth, tell them everything!” I yelled at him.

“Huh? Uh… I will, yes Your Highness,” came his panicked reply.

I only let him leave the palace after he had given me this assurance. As had become

custom, I sent him off with a few gifts and very sincere letters that my maids had penned on my behalf. After this, I realized to what extent I had underestimated the infamous reputation of the First Prince.

A very reluctant maid reported to me the rumors that had spread but a few hours after my latest sparring partner had left the palace.

“They… The story goes that… that Your Highness was afraid and had… had made the result of the match…”

The rumors flowing through the capital had only worsened, despite my latest ploy. Now the populace believed that I had failed to win, yet still tried to fake the results so that I would seem the victor.

“Ha… Really now.”

At that point, I chose to pay no more attention to the outside world’s opinions. No matter what I did, they would still hate me.

“I’ll just practice. Yes, damn them all, I am just going to train.”

By then, it had been a full month since I had started sparring, and the number of opponents I had faced was twelve.

I was committed to train with the Dragon Sword and keep it under control when dealing with my opponents. As a result of my continued efforts, I was now able to exert some control over it, though not to a perfect extent. The cherry on the cake was that I had learned that the dominance of Mana Rings over Mana Hearts was in no way absolute.

“The rings become capable of destroying Mana Hearts when there are multiple of them, not just one,” my uncle quickly rebuked me when I had voiced my observations. “Those you have faced have all been single-chain knights, not on a level to destroy you.”

Even if he scolded me so, I could still see that he was surprised by my growth in such a short period of time. He was just too proud to tell this to me directly.

“How many opponents are yet to face me?”

“Nine remain, Your Highness,” the maid replied after having scanned the list.

“Huh. I require more.”

It felt like yesterday when I had become so greatly excited at my first victory. By now, I have tired of these sparring matches.

They were becoming quite boring.

“These apprentices are not exciting me at all,” I stated with a giggle.

“The final opponent is someone who possesses great skill, unlike the others,” Carls Ulrich advised me, for he was ever the voice of caution.

“Well, those Your Highness have faced up to now were all below average. They have leaned on their rings, hoping that that would be enough for a swift victory,” he continued. “Yet, the last opponent has been taught proper swordsmanship.” He studied the list once more. “This is not someone who merely waves their family’s sword about; no, this is a talented person who has trained properly for knighthood. Arwen Kirgayen is apprenticed to the Templar Knights.”

“The Templar Knights?”

“In terms of their renown and skills, the Templar Knights are one of the greatest orders in the kingdom. Arwen Kirgayen is one of their carefully selected apprentices, possessing great potential to become one their full-fledged knights. Rumor has it that even in sparring matches where Arwen uses no mana, knights struggle to easily overcome the apprentice.”

I turned to one of my maids. “Do you know why this Arwen comes to face me?”

She looked greatly embarrassed but answered nonetheless.

“Your Highness might not recall, but there had been a slight misunderstanding between Your Highness and Arwen Kirgayen.”

“What misunderstanding? Against a templar, it must have a pretty one-sided fight.”

The First Prince’s past behavior continued to amaze me. To engender so many grudges in such a short lifespan could only be called a talent.

Certainly, it was a talent that was not benefiting me at all. The maid now hesitated and

rather looked down than answer me.

“What? Tell me, what did I do?” I demanded of her.

“You… Your Highness made fun of Arwen…”

“Be more specific, maid. Did I insult him, or his family?”

Carls Ulrich interrupted then, coming to the beleaguered maid’s rescue.

“Your Highness, Arwen Kirgayen is not a man, but a woman.”

The moment that he spoke these words, a dark suspicion immediately entered my mind. Carls continued describing my actions.

“The incident in question… Well, Your Highness petted her body.”

“What? That’s insane!” I screamed in disgust, followed by a torrent of curses. “What a horny pig! An ill-mannered bastard, with not a grain of decency to be found!”

Carls and the maid slowly approached me, trying to calm me down.

“Your Highness, please calm down, relax.”

“Your Highness was still young at the time, but a boy.”

“Young!? I was young? And pray tell, how young was I?”

“The… The age of Your Highness at the time,” the maid sputtered, “was fifteen.”

What a damnably uncouth little idiot! Molesting a woman!? At any age, this was a grievous act to commit!

I felt then that I inhabited a sullied body, a dirty sack of flesh to which any sin was acceptable.

I had once thought that I could live with all the bad karma that the prince had generated. However, this was too much to bear.

Molestation was a step taken too far.

“And… And…” the maid trailed off.

“What!? There’s more!?”

She hesitated for a good while before continuing.

“After… After Your Highness did it, you said: ‘The ugly thing was too dirty, so I cleaned it with my hands.’ “

This addition to the act made me feel far worse.

“I am left speechless by this revelation. I have no answer to it,” I muttered as I shook my head in shame and anger.

I had known the First Prince was a mess, but I had not expected him to be this fucked up.

He was an excuse for a human being who respected neither man nor woman.

* * *

“I look forward to when we cross paths once more, Your Highness.”

“I don’t need you to tell me all that. Just make sure the people outside the palace know what happened here today.”

As I watched my twentieth sparring partner leave, I considered the progress I had made thus far.

My Mana Heart had increased in size. It was on par with that of a Sword Runner, and such growth was quite satisfactory when I considered the short time I had to build it up. I also had more control over the Dragon Sword by now. It was no longer necessary for my uncle to intervene.

The last time he had stepped in had been when I had faced my thirteenth opponent. I had also lost a lot of weight. My chubby form still resembled that of a wealthy and indolent merchant instead of a knight, though. Still, it was a great improvement if one considered the sorry state this body had been in.

I at least looked more like a human being now. I told my uncle as much. The stingy and

outspoken man had barbs for me still, though.

“I don’t want to say that you still look like a chunk of bacon, but…”

The day was bright, and the sky clear.

It was the day that I would meet my final sparring partner.

I headed to the training hall, and it felt like I was a filthy pig being dragged to a slaughterhouse.

Please, slow down, I whispered to my frantic heart. It helped little, especially as the even more nervous Carls was walking alongside me.

“The beauty of her swordsmanship will only be magnificent if it does not harm Your Highness.”

“Okay, Carls, I know. Now shut up!” I screamed at the knight.

We reached the training hall at long last. Arwen Kirgayen was already awaiting me.

She stood up, approached me, and then bowed her head. Just like that, she had finished greeting me.

Now, she stared at me with her piercing eyes. Just like the others, she made no secret of her feelings toward me.

As I stared at her, I could not help but think: *This seems like it’s going to be a huge mistake.*

‘The ugly thing was too dirty, so I cleaned it with my hands.’

It was a despicable thing to have said. To molest and then so insult a woman was evil beyond reckoning.

The insult had not even a bit of truth to it. Arwen was far from an ‘ugly thing’.

No, she was a beautiful woman.

A beautiful woman who stood before me, her bright eyes screaming for my blood.

CHAPTER 12
THERE IS NO DISTINCTION BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN (2)

I had a rough guess as to why the boy had committed such a heinous act. He had found himself too easily and too deeply attracted to this woman – a crooked obsession indeed. And if he had truly believed her to be ugly, then there was something wrong with his eyes. I now stared at Arwen with those selfsame eyes, and what I saw was a figure of perfected proportions.

However, Arwen Kirgayen's face clearly showed her aversion toward me. "Your Highness has not changed at all," she said to me in a frigid voice. Still, it was a pleasure for me to hear even this dry and emotionless tone flow from her lips.

"No, Arwen, I have changed a great deal," came my response. I was in all truth an utterly different being, my physical state notwithstanding. She could never know this, though, so I just continued to stare at her as I appreciated her beauteous form.

"Count Balahard has arrived," a knight of the court announced. The woman before me fell to one knee, her head bowed.

"I, Arwen Kirgayen, Apprentice to the Templar Knights, greet you, Count Balahard."

My uncle entered the room, his eyes shining with obvious pleasure.

"Arwen! I am glad you have arrived safely. And how fares your father?"

The lady greeted him with a gentle smile, and I surmised that they were acquainted.

"I thank you for your concern, Sir. My father is safe and in good health."

"All right then. By the way…" my uncle's words faltered as he turned to me. His eyes seemed to wonder what I had done to her, for she clearly had reasons enough to challenge me so. I had no intention of furnishing an answer, so I avoided the man's gaze. He considered me briefly, his disgust written plain upon his face.

“Take care against him,” he told Arwen as he turned to her.

“Hey, as an observer you should be neutral, right?” I asked him, yet my words fell on deaf ears.

“The sword of the prince is dangerous,” he instructed Arwen.

As she listened to him, Arwen just nodded formally and expressed her gratitude for his advice.

“Well, my meddling is at an end,” the Count muttered. He stepped from us and raised his arms into the air.

“Let us begin… Go!”

Arwen’s eyes flashed as she charged at me, her blade coming in a diagonal arc toward my waist. I had prepared for her strike and so blocked it without difficulty. Still, as our swords clashed, a wave of strange energy flowed through me. My chest heaved up and down. My Mana Heart continued to screech, almost as if plagued by the powers of her single Mana Ring. I had not expected this at all, yet had no time to consider such things.

It was because she was still coming for me, her eyes like those of a hawk bearing down on a mouse.

Her second swing came on vertically, almost cleaving me open from crown to crotch. I had sidestepped it and swiveled my body, and as her blade so narrowly passed me by, I battered it to one side. Still possessing momentum, I sliced my sword toward her waist. She just grabbed my arm and diverted the attack, neutralizing my strike. Her counterattack followed as her knee bore into my ribs. Simultaneously, she started to twist my arm. I contorted my body along with the arm to avoid the pain she so dearly wished to inflict.

Luckily, I was able to escape her grapple and retreat by hopping away. Her sword still hunted me, though. The sound of blade upon blade rang out as our swords clashed once more, sparks flying into the air. I was forced to retreat another step. My stomach roiled inside me, and my mana reserves were shaken to their core.

I did not get the chance of calming myself, for Arwen’s blade just kept coming and coming at me. I could not even catch a single breath. She did not seem to be pressed in the slightest. Her breathing was as constant as her strikes and parries, showing how

much battle experience she truly possessed.

I scolded myself, then. I had to calm down; it should not be difficult to defeat her. I had but to focus…

I felt my Mana Heart grow calm as mana once more coursed smoothly through my body. Again, our swords clashed, and this time Arwen was forced back under the impact. She stumbled. Gone where her smooth and controlled movements.

My Dragon Sword had at long last opened its venomous maw, and Arwen Kirgayen was its chosen prey.

"Well…" Her surprise and resentment were written upon her elegant features.

'She has learned from proper swordsmen, even full-fledged knights cannot triumph over her easily. You should take great care.'

Carl's advice echoed through my head, then. She was clearly on a higher level than the others, even if they all possessed but a single ring.

The difference in skill between an apprentice knight in the countryside and one who was tutored by an elite order of the kingdom was considerable.

Still, it was not enough to save her.

==========

□ Arwen Kirgayen – [Female] [19 years old] [Apprentice Knight]

□ Aptitude: – [Swordsmanship-A], [Stamina-B] [Mana-B]

□ Characteristics – [Elite Swordsmanship] [Superior Beauty]

==========

I could see her status window. The woman before me was almost my equal in raw aptitude, although a bit weaker to be truthful.

It meant she had no advantages over me. Her potential was still staggering, though, as things stood, she could not beat me.

I also considered the sword that I wielded. It was a blade made to slay dragons, and few humans would dare to face it if they knew its true nature.

A sword that once brought great dragons low could easily deal with a prideful lioness.

Arwen spat on the ground, tightening her two-handed grip upon her sword. Her eyes were filled with resentment.

Then, she screeched as she rushed at me once more.

“Kyaaaah!”

I grinned as I firmed up and broadened my stance.

“Now the game begins,” I whispered.

* * *

Both of our breaths mixed in the air as we panted like spent dogs. Arwen was clearly exhausted as her shoulders rose and fell with every breath, her mouth hanging slack so that she could gulp in greater quantities of air. Still, she fought on.

She had lost some of her beauty since the morning. Her hair was no longer tied in a neat lock; no, it had been loosened and covered half of her face.

Her clothing was disheveled and even torn in a few places. She looked like a madwoman, yet I did not dare laugh. I probably looked the same.

“Stop! That is enough for today,” my uncle stated as we tried to catch our breaths, looking for an opening.

“Oh, really?” I asked in a disappointed tone. “I was about to finish this.”

“What a coincidence, Your Highness. I was about to do the same.”

“Then, shall we continue?” I dared her.

“Anytime you want.”

“Stop this,” my uncle said as he turned to the healers. “Tend to their wounds, quick

now."

I stared at Arwen as the doctors fussed over us. She held my gaze for a few moments and then turned away without a word. After she had disappeared, my uncle dismissed everyone from the training hall. I staggered to my room and threw myself onto my bed.

Heavy fatigue had taken over my entire body. My mana and stamina had been utterly exhausted, and I wanted to fall to sleep at once.

Still, I forced myself to stand. I had to fill my Mana Heart once more. I knew I would need it tomorrow.

* * *

"Let us begin… Go!" my uncle announced once more. I gripped my sword tightly, determined to surpass my limitations, and conclude this match once and for all. "Please, wait," Arwen said as she raised her hands into the air. "I have something to say."

She brought her sword down, point-first into the sand before her, and looked at me.

"I will not accept an apology from you," she said with blazing eyes. She then drew a line in the sand, removing my only means of restoring my pride.

Hers was a bizarre yet bold gesture.

"We battle fiercely… did you draw that line out of fear of losing?" I asked her then.

She immediately looked insulted, and I regretted my rash words. Still, they had been uttered and could not be taken back.

"How about this?" I proposed. "The winner gets the right to do what they want with the defeated one. If you defeat me, you can force me to kneel before you and apologize." I had thrown her a bit of bait; I knew she could not resist it. She could not hide her desire, and that was exactly the response I had expected. Still, others also reacted to this, for the knights of the court starting hollering from the side.

"But, Your Highness, such is folly!"

"Please retract your statement."

“How about you become more aware of the position you find yourself in, boy?” My uncle added as he scolded me with fury in his voice.

“Is there a royal order that one cannot correct wrongdoings? What is wrong with kneeling before another in repentance?” I asked of him.

“Boy, because of you alone, the honor of the royal family…”

“Will I be plunged into ruin? Will my family lose their reputation? Or does the greater shame lie in not apologizing for a grave misdeed?”

Arwen considered my words and then turned toward my uncle, the Count Balahard. I could see she intended to accept my proposal.

“What say you, Sir Balahard?”

My uncle told her in no uncertain terms to keep the honor of the Leonberger line in mind when she made her demand of me. She nodded at this.

“I dare not commit a disrespectful act,” she stated as she brought her sword into a combat-ready stance.

“Are you sure about that?” I asked her. “You have no idea what I intend to command if I win.”

“If I lose, do as Your Majesty intends to do,” she said with utter confidence in her victory.

“What if I ask you to do something truly strange? There should be no complaints from you then,” I warned Arwen. Her answer was sure and firm.

“You will never win.”

“That’s good, so you won’t complain later on.”

Instead of answering me, she rushed toward me with a cry, her sword raised.

* * *

Arwen Kirgayen knelt on the ground, panting. She was balancing herself on her sword

as she looked up at me.

“How the hell did you do that?” Her expression was one of utter disbelief.

“Well, I have my ways,” I answered with a giggle.

My playful manner only made her seem more disheartened. Our match had ended in the same manner as those with my other sparring partners.

She struggled to understand her defeat, for she had been utterly convinced that her victory was at hand.

Arwen must have almost tasted the revenge that she so longed to enact upon me.

I stood there, pondering the situation for a few moments.

“So then, let me tell you what I desire you to do for me.”

Arwen Kirgayen’s face now turned ashen and pale, for she only now realized the consequences of our earlier agreement.

Seeing the horror writ upon her face, I could not help but burst into laughter.

CHAPTER 13
THERE IS NO DISTINCTION BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN (3)

I knew what I wanted from Arwen Kirgayen. She had to be tested.

“Arwen, you will report to my bedchambers.”

Every person in that hall became rigid with shock. I could see that Arwen had herself grown stiff until she finally violently exhaled as she tried to marshal her anger. The palace knights had caught their breaths, and the first protests flowed from them.

“Hut… you little…”

“But, Your Highness!”

“You are… You have…”

Everyone looked at me with various emotions writ upon their faces. Anger, contempt, and disappointment were to be found in every heart that had heard my demand. I could feel the collective animosity of those in the hall, yet such emotions paled to the hatred that Arwen held toward me.

Carls Ulrich was the first to step forward. “Your Majesty… Ooops, uh, Your Highness…” He could not form a sentence beyond this.

“I vowed not to intervene, but this is…” My uncle had given voice to his displeasure as well.

I ignored all their outcries and protestations. My only concern was Arwen and her reaction. At long last, she opened her mouth, and the words that flowed from it sounded harsher than the coldest of winters.

“Is that really what you want?”

You're lower than the most corrupted filth; her eyes seemed to be shouting at me.

It seemed like the ideal moment to end my test, and in the minds of those gathered here, the childish prank of a prince.

"Aaaaarweeeeen Kirgaaaayeeen," I giggled as I sang out her name. The look she gave me must have been how she had looked at this accursed boy after he had molested her. No doubt, she believed that the sadistic prince was planning another such act. How wrong she was.

"My true demand, Arwen, is this: Be my knight."

I watched as her icy face shattered into so many shards of confusion.

"What are you talking about!?"

"Exactly what I have just said, Arwen. I seek your pledge."

Embarrassment now reigned upon her beautiful features. She turned a confused gaze toward the palace knights. I understood her unspoken question.

She did not comprehend why I sought the pledge of an apprentice knight if I was already under the protection of triple-chain knights.

I decided to answer her.

"These are not truly my knights to command."

Their dedication was to the king, and he could order them away from me at any moment.

Even I existed only if the king allowed me to. What I wished for was someone who pledged themselves to me and me alone.

"Arwen, I seek a knight who is loyal to me."

"With but a word from Your Highness, two-chain and three-chain knights would swear their allegiance!"

She did not understand, and this was because she did not want to understand. She was fundamentally disgusted at the thought of any further involvement with the First

Prince.

“Okay Arwen, you are correct then. You are not capable enough to serve royalty. No, you’re just an apprenticed knight who could not even beat me.”

She bit hard into her lower lip at my insult, yet could not contain her anger as she finally snapped at me.

“I think you just want a sword-swinging prostitute, that’s what you want!”

Well, she certainly did not pull her punches. Her face had the same cast to it as warriors who were prepared to face death to defend their values and their honor. She had realized that such a death was now very possible. She had gone too far to snap at a prince in such an extreme and public manner.

“What I seek is neither a harlot guard, nor an apprentice that even I can defeat,” I calmly explained to her. “No, I seek the pledge of the future knight that is to be Sir Arwen Kirgayen.”

Her loyalty would be worth a great deal to me.

==========

□ Arwen Kirgayenne – [Female] [19 years old] [Apprentice Knight]

□ Aptitude – [Swordsmanship-A] [Stamina-B] [Mana-B]

□ Characteristics – [Elite Swordsmanship] [Superior Beauty]

==========

Only one of her aptitudes was graded on the A-level, yet I knew that she could become a Sword Master if she were tutored by one. Such was her potential that I was certain that her fate was to become such a master of the blade. I really could not afford to miss such a chance; to have a warrior of her potential slip through my fingers would be a great blunder.

“You will continue to improve your skills, Arwen. You will become stronger. The way I see it, you will become greater than these palace knights. Why, perhaps even greater than my uncle Bale. This is the potential I see in you.”

Her expression did not change one bit at first. Then, she became uncomfortable after having been compared to the palace knights in such a fashion. She was trying to hide these feelings, yet they showed clearly all the same.

"I might not be the type of talent that Your Majesty expects me to be," she said in a soft tone, her head humbly lowered. I saw into her true nature for the first time, then. Arwen Kirgayen was shy. Hers must have been a difficult life, as one of the few females who had entered the manly world of the kingdom's knights. As the realm's traditions went, strength was seen as the greater virtue, and women had to be protected at all costs. This culture made it hard for a woman to be recognized as a fully-fledged knight. Through my centuries of existence, I had seen countless talented women be disgraced due to their gender and the roles they were expected to fulfill.

The fact of her beauty might have made things even more difficult for her. No matter her martial potential and prowess, people would always have looked differently upon her, even if she had become a formal Templar Knight. They would continue to view her as a beautiful woman rather than a lethal and devoted knight.

After I had considered all of this, I now viewed her in a completely different light. It was almost as if she was a swift deer, thirsty for praise not on how its pelt shined in the sun but rather on how deftly it jumped through the forest. I was more sincere when I spoke to her then.

"Arwen, what I seek is not the apprentice before me. No, I ask for your pledge because I seek the blade of the future Sword Master, Sir Arwen Kirgayen."

She was shaking now, and I knew I had won through to her true desires and greatest ambition. Still, she was cautious. She had to be.

"Your Highness, promise me a single thing. Promise that you shall treat me like a knight. If so, I shall do as Your Highness bids me to do."

It was not a difficult request to fulfill, as it had been my intention from the start. Without a doubt, Arwen Kirgayen was a rare beauty that bards could sing about for centuries to come. To me, though, her true value lay in her immense potential.

"Very well, Arwen. You have my word."

Upon these words, she knelt on her right knee.

“I, Arwen Kirgayen, eldest daughter of the house Kirgayen, pledge my allegiance to Prince Adrian Leonberger, and I dedicate my sword and my entire life to his service.”

“I hereby knight you, Arwen Kirgayen, in the name of King Leonberger’s firstborn son, Adrian Leonberger – be brave, be polite and be loyal.”

And so, under my authority as First Prince, Arwen had become a fully-fledged knight, no longer an apprentice on probation.

My uncle, who had been silently watching these proceedings, just laughed.

“Hah, what a bloody mess,” he said.

It seemed that he found humor in my every action. I was a funny fat boy to him whether I anointed knights or trained in the rain.

“Uncle, with the powers of a prince, I can knight her. There won’t be any problems.”

He just shook his head and chuckled.

“Whoever told you that, boy?”

* * *

Arwen decided to return to the Templar Knights.

She might have been anointed, but her training to become a full knight had not yet been completed. She would complete the training at her old knightly order and return to my service as a knight in both name and ability. I knew this would not keep her long, and she had asked me to be patient.

“I look forward to your return with a glad heart,” I had told her, nodding my blessing that she could depart.

“Then stay strong until the day that we meet once more, Your Highness,” she stated with a deep bow.

The extreme courtesy that she was showing me was quite frightening. I quickly understood her intent, though. Even if I had coerced her into my service, she still took her vows seriously, as any true knight would.

As I headed back to my chambers, Carls Ulrich and I had one of our rare conversations.

“Your Highness…”

“What, Carls?”

“The words you have spoken earlier…”

“Earlier? What do you mean? Ah, those words.”

I realized that he was referencing that I had said that the palace knights were not truly my own knights.

“Does that fact sadden you, Carls?”

No matter how much it did sadden him, the truth remained the truth. The palace knights who served me served because that was their appointed duty, not because they felt like it.

“What I said is true,” I explained to the knight. “If the king commanded you to go somewhere else, you would obey him, or would you not?”

Carls struggled to answer me, but his next statement greatly surprised me.

“If His Majesty demands that I leave you, then I would pledge my allegiance to Your Highness.”

I cared little about whether he would truly pledge himself to me. The Knights of the Court are only loyal to the king, to the royal palace’s ruler. I was but a tenant who lived in a single corner of this great palace.

“Would you accept my allegiance, then?” he asked. It was true that the two of us had grown close. I still remembered him at the start, just standing at attention and not speaking a single word.

“No, Carls,” I answered mischievously.

“Why not, Your Highness?”

“Because you’re just not that good.”

He laughed at this, believing it to be another one of my jokes.

However, my statement had been serious.

* * *

Arwen Kiragayen was a brightly blooming rose that grew atop a great cliff. Countless men had attempted to scale that cliff and pluck the flower that was her heart, yet it was their own hearts that had been broken in the attempt.

As with any rose, she had thorns.

It was then that these men heard that Arwen had sworn an oath to me – that she had sworn an oath to a horny wretch of a man who had molested and insulted her.

At first, they could not believe it. Knowing how noble Arwen was, they had dismissed it as a baseless rumor. Eventually, though, they knew that the rumor was the truth. Knights close to Arwen had confirmed it without a doubt.

These men then loudly cursed the lecherous prince. They believed she had been threatened into taking such an oath. Some even went as far as to say that Prince Adrian Leonberger had performed some vile magic upon her. She had answered these accusations with the truth.

“It had been a bet. The victor of the bout could demand anything from the loser.”

The truth had made the men even angrier. “A knight’s pledge forced by a sparring bet?” they fumed. Some even approached the commander of the Templar Knights to protest the event. They believed that such a respected man could save her from the evil being who had forced her into the situation.

However, Arwen did not seem to be troubled.

“I shall fulfill my vow,” was all that she said.

Still, the commander of the Templar Knights was deeply concerned. He asked her if there was something that she was not telling him, something that could land her in great peril. She had just shaken her head.

“I have already vowed to be his sword, and I shall fulfill this oath. I shall live with it.”

Being faced with her firm decision, the commander had no choice but to back down. After this, a few people changed their opinion of the First Prince.

They had heard that he had become fit and had diligently devoted himself to developing his body and mind.

The rumors then naturally took on a new form, with people saying that Arwen had pledged her allegiance because she had become infatuated with her new master. When she heard such rumors, her sorrow almost overwhelmed her.

“Even with all my efforts, they see me as nothing but a girl.”

* * *

I had been pleasantly procrastinating upon my bed when a messenger arrived. “Does it come from the royal palace?” I asked the man.

“Yes, Your Highness,” the messenger said. “You have been invited to an upcoming royal banquet.”

CHAPTER 14
NOT ALL OF THEM DISAPPEARED (1)

A maid handed me a golden envelope.

“Dear Adrian Leonberger, First Prince.

Last spring, I had to doubt my ears because of the news about Your Highness’ unfortunate accident. To Your Highness, who was so brave and strong… (sycophantic words)”

I turned the pages over quickly.

“There were days spent in mystery until I hear of the news that Your Highness’ body has been restored to a point where he can go out of the palace once more; I sent a letter with an excited heart…”

I ignored the useless phrases.

“We prepared a small gathering to celebrate the health of Your Highness, with the members of the Social Club for Special Noblemen. Please come and grace the meeting with your presence…”

If you summarize the content of the invitation, which was pounded with useless sentences, it was simply:

“Let’s meet in celebration of your recovery.”

An unexpected invitation. I asked the maid about the Social Club for Special Noblemen.

The maid struggled. “It is a social gathering where Your Highness was a member.”

I furrowed my brow. “Is it a strange group?”

The maid answered my question with a grim face.

“For the girls, the customs of the Noblemen’s Club are incomprehensible…”

I could tell it was more than just having something to eat or drink.

I was busy practicing and didn’t intend to attend such a futile meeting. I won’t come, I decided.

However, I glanced at the letter’s sender’s name-

“The wise, valiant, thoughtful Prince Adrian’s eternal friend, Bernardo of the Eli Family.”

“Eli?”

“Lord Bernardo Eli is the chairman of the Social Club,” the maid said.

Eli.

It was a name etched in my memory.

[A hundred years ago, the man who had been insisting on mana hearts, Count Eli, died. Since then, mana hearts became a low-end tool for mercenaries.]

On the day we talked about mana hearts, Count Eli was among the names Uncle mentioned.

“What will you do, Your Highness? If you would like to attend, I will make preparations; if you do not want to attend, I will send them communication,” the maid asked with a pensive expression.

“I will attend…”

“I understand,” the maid’s face became noticeably darker. “I will make preparations.”

She looked very disappointed that I will attend the meeting.

It sounds like a very unhealthy gathering. The maid’s face says it all.

It’s not good enough for me.

But it wasn’t for the ‘incomprehensible’ customs that I would attend.

It was because there was a strong interest in the family name of the one who held on to mana hearts until the end…

Count Eli.

* * *

It is not the royal banquet, but a small club meeting. I thought it would be enough to just go without getting ready.

But it was an illusion.

“I’m just going to a meeting, why do I need to do this?”

“Your Majesty’s body shape has changed so much that he needs to get his clothes adjusted…”

“Are we not done yet?”

The tailor had tormented me all day long, taking measurements, showing me his drawings.

“There is a saying that clothes are wings. It takes a little patience to wear those wings,” he said.

“Are you kidding me? Does it look like this body is made to fly?” I was annoyed.

The tailor had an apologetic yet determined look.

“Your Highness, I’m not good enough, but I will do my best with all my energy!”

Damn.

My body now has poorly defined muscles coexisting with lumps of fat. It was that of a typical muscular pig.

“All right, finish as fast as you can.”

After saying that, I allowed the tailor to continue his measurements peacefully.

Wait-

“Have you made my clothes before?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

My clothes were uselessly colorful, unsuited to a pig-like body.

“What color are you going to make?”

“Of course, according to the taste of the Majesty, in gold, silver, or white…”

“Okay. Make it black.”

I immediately cut off the tailor’s words. If left as it was, I will continue to wear colors like a clown.

The tailor looked surprised.

“Black?”

“Yes. I want minimal decoration and simple design.”

The tailor suddenly had a dark face.

I realized it wasn’t the prince’s choice, but his taste.

I reminded him a few more times to make sure: Don’t make it extravagant.

“I will do as Your Highness wants,” he replied with a low voice.

It seemed that he wanted to do it differently, but he can’t do anything.

The person who will wear the clothes is the First Prince.

So soon after the measurements, the tailor returned with the finished clothes.

“I followed your order, Your Highness.”

The tailor’s face was full of pride as he laid the clothes down.

“Well…”

It is exactly as I wanted.

Color is black; decoration is minimal; the design is simple. However, the cloth was luxurious.

As I lifted the clothes and considered it while frowning, the tailor said confidently.

“It will fit you perfectly.”

With the help of the tailor and the maid, I put on the new clothes.

“Hooh!” I exclaimed.

I was very satisfied. I wore brown shoes with it, and it fitted nicely with the color scheme.

My body, although it couldn’t fly, looks pretty good.

“You have skills,” I acknowledged the tailor.

“With Your Highness’ words, it feels like 40 years of hardness in my life melted away.”

He looked proud and confident in his abilities.

“I need you to make my clothes for the banquet at the Royal Palace in about two months from now.”

“I’ll start working right away, Your Highness.”

“No. Wait. My sizes will be a little different at that time.

“No. Wait a minute. The dimensions will be a little different.”

Two months is a lot of time to burn all the fat I had left.

“Then, please send for me anytime. I’ll leave now, Your Highness.” He bowed, obviously pleased by my compliment, and left.

I looked at myself again in front of the mirror.

“I’m losing it…”

I lost so much weight that my face has started to change to someone I didn’t know.

It was a face that some would call handsome.

* * *

It was the day of the meeting.

With me are four other people. Since it was the first time I’ll leave the royal palace from quite some time, court knights and Carls stood close to me.

They were very nervous about the possibility of something unfortunate.

“Relax,” I told them. “We haven’t even left the palace yet.”

A carriage appeared from a distance, bearing the emblems of a golden lion and a roaring dragon on a white background.

A maid and I climbed inside. Carls and the other court knights will be riding horses in a formation around the carriage.

“Go.”

At my words, the carriage began to move.

However, Carls, who was obviously nervous about leaving the palace with me, approached to close the shutter on the carriage’s window.

The shutter was made of thick iron plates, to prevent snipers. It also prevented me from seeing the outside world.

“Can you keep it open, just a little? I wanted to see outside a little…”

Carls closed the shutter.

I left the prison that was the Royal Palace just to be in another prison, this time a

carriage.

It was boring. I could not even hear outside the carriage.

“Well?”

I twisted my body and looked at the maid at the corner of the carriage.

She had an unsightly scar on her fine skin.

“The wound…” I muttered.

The maid lifted her collar, but it was not enough to cover up the huge scar on her neck.

“I upset Your Highness, and deserved to be punished,” she mumbled.

Damn. So, it was also the pig’s fault.

I was so sorry and embarrassed that I tried to look away, but in the cramped carriage, where else would I look?

I spoke to her again. “What is your name?”

From the moment I opened my eyes until I closed them, I was surrounded by maids, but I didn’t even know their names.

The maid looked at me with a shy, jumpy, doe-like manner. I feel guiltier.

Good eyes, fine skin, and scars. I was not the one who did it, but why do I feel guilty?

“I’m Adelia Bavaria, Your Highness.”

She said the name as if she was sad.

“What?!” I stiffened when I heard her name. “Bavaria?”

“The family is barely on the noble list. We are no family that Your Highness might be interested in…”

“You are a descendant of the Bavarian family?”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

Oh, my God.

I pressed my hand to my forehead, overcome with dizziness.

I never thought I’d hear this name once more.

My memories are in a warehouse filled with dust. A name popped out of the dusty piles.

Bavaria…

CHAPTER 15
NOT ALL OF THEM DISAPPEARED (2)

Magic and mana gathering was nothing against the fairies.

Crafting and metallurgy were trash against the dwarves.

Combat and hunting could not match the orcs.

Power and wisdom were meaningless against the giants.

Humans were just one of many sentient races that existed in the world.

Fairies despised human savagery, and dwarves laughed at our cities.

Orcs hunted humans, and giants wiped down entire villages easily.

It was a time where the most important thing was to survive. It was a time where humans were used to being robbed or killed.

It was a time that humans were treated no better than livestock.

Then, some heroes united the scattered human beings and led them into a long war, which ended with the humans being the dominant species on the planet.

People called them the Five Predecessors.

One of them ended the long, evil history of the Giant King, Eda.

[The Sword of Cheol-hyeol] Agnes Bavaria.

The battlefield where she was in came to my mind. She trampled hundreds of the giants, rushing towards them, and destroying their castle.

She was a warrior that no adversary could equal and a great commander. She started with no one believing her, but by the end of the war, all surviving knights were under

her Cheol-hyeol Sword.

She and her knights were so powerful, enough to scare even the other predecessors.

A king was born from the Bavaria family.

The Bavaria family is a legendary family.

It's hard to believe the maid in front of me is her descendant.

"Ha…"

It was so outrageous that I had a headache. What's more, she doesn't have any idea how great her ancestors were.

The headache was so intense that I had to sleep, and I slept through the rest of the trip.

The wagon stopped.

Stomp.

Someone knocked on the carriage. Adelia Bavaria asked me for patience and opened the window.

"Your Highness, you have arrived at your destination," Carls said from out of the window.

For a moment, I wondered if it would be better to go back to the palace.

However, I decided to push through. Adelia Bavaria is my maid. I had a lot of time talking to her.

It wasn't the case for the descendant of the Eli family. After today, I won't be attending another meeting like this.

"Your Highness?" She had a frightened deer-like face every time she looks at me. I felt bad.

"Do not worry about it. I'll talk to you later."

After opening the door, Carls looked at me, then at Adelia.

“Your Highness, did she do anything…”

“Don’t ask me anything.”

“I’m sorry, Your Highness,” Carls apologized. “Please follow my lead.”

The carriage stopped in a well-decorated garden. There was a large building not far from the carriage. It was a huge white mansion.

Around it was soldiers armed with spears. They took one look at my knights’ and the carriage’s emblem, and let us in.

A man dressed extravagantly welcomed us.

He knelt in an exaggerated motion. His face was like a priest receiving the Holy Spirit. It was burdensome to look at.

“Prince Adrien Leonberger, Prince Bernard of the Eli family, is glad to see you!”

Eli family.

“When Your Highness appeared in such elegant and lean figure, I could not…”

As I looked at the handsome blond man, I immediately checked him. A status window came into my view.

“Your Highness? Are you uncomfortable?”

As I stood there silently, staring up in space, Bernard Eli watched me with an anxious expression.

“No, just…” I laughed. “Thank you very much for today.”

When he saw me laugh, he looked confused for a moment, then replied with a sad expression.

“I hope I can live up to your expectations. This way, please.”

He started to guide us but turned around to speak again.

“Oh, indeed, we have set aside a seat for your knights.”

Carls looked at me for approval. I nodded.

The court knights took off and headed inward.

The inside and the outside of the mansion were two completely different worlds.

The summer night’s air was clear outside, but in this place, a strange scent stung my nose.

As I watched the smoke from the candles lit on both sides of the hallway, I felt like reality disappeared.

“Your Highness.”

The maids going down the hall saw me and bowed their heads. Each time, their bare flesh swing.

They’re not wearing any clothes.

The man guiding us sniffed as if he felt refreshed. “The real thing is further inside.”

“Uh, yes.” I nodded.

We then proceeded through the hallway. Occasionally, when passing by tightly closed doors, I can overhear embarrassing noises.

[Keep on……! If you……]

“Your Highness?”

It seems that I have stopped walking as I heard the sounds.

Bernardo Eli looked back at me with a twisted expression.

“Uh, let’s go.”

After walking for a long time, we reached a big door at the end of the hallway.

“Then…”

He smiled as he opened the door for me.

The sight beyond it came to my eyes.

Naked women can be seen over the smoke. There were also bunches of distracted men holding glasses in one hand and women in another. Some even had women on both sides.

Men’s and women’s bodies melted together.

It’s a completely shocking scene.

Some of the men noticed our entrance and frowned as if he didn’t recognize who came in.

“Friends! Look at who I brought! I almost didn’t recognize him. Come on!”

Bernard Eli announced loudly, his voice echoing, but no one seemed to recognize me.

“Who is it?”

“A new member?”

Men looked at me through the haze and smirked.

“What new member? Let’s welcome, Prince Adrien Leonberger!”

On that note, everyone’s eyes opened wide with shock.

“No! Your Highness! How did you become so muscular! I didn’t recognize you.”

Still, their hands continued to hold glasses and women.

Even with dealing with a member of a royal family, they did not show respect. And no one found it strange.

Ha, like this.

It was the normal way they interacted with the prince in the past. It was what he allowed.

“Your Highness?”

Bernard Eli was no longer as gallant as he acted when he met me outside.

“Come this way.”

He, like other men, had a blurry face due to the smoke. He dragged me inside a cubicle.

Perfect.

Inside were several women who seemed to be waiting for me.

“When I see the beauty of His Highness, my heart is throbbing; I don’t know what to do!”

The women slithered in, whispering nonsense.

“His Highness has arrived, so let’s play properly!”

Bernard Eli said, raising his cup high.

* * *

“Ah, the yolk is so perfect! Slurp it like this! Yum!”

“Hey! The rice is cooked well done!”

On one side, his guests were talking about food and gluttony.

“That’s good, it’s good to touch the flesh once.”

“Child, I don’t want to make fun of you.”

On the other side were lewd remarks.

However, the First Prince didn't seem to be on any side. He was watching it all silently.

Bernardo Eli stared at the prince. By now, he should have been drunk and insane, whether with alcohol or with women.

However, he appeared overly fine.

It seems that something else changed aside from weight loss.

"What can we do to serve His Highness properly?"

The women, who had been brought in for a high price, clung to the prince with seductive eyes.

"Don't touch. These clothes are precious," the prince responded sternly.

Is he kidding? Bernardo Eli thought. The prince was still smiling. He couldn't tell whether he was joking or telling the truth.

He saw that the woman had an awkward reaction, though.

The woman took off her hand but remained close to the prince.

He spoke to the prince. "Did she do anything that upset you? Should I get another bitch?"

The prince shook his hand. "No, I don't care, do as you do."

Someone sat down next to the prince.

"How has Your Highness become so lean? If you have any secrets, please let me know."

He is the son of Baron Balson.

"If I put a knife in my body, will that happen to me, too?" the fool added.

"Yeah! It won't work with just a knife; it must be the royal sword of the royal family!"

Bernard Eli turned pale at the fool's words. Fortunately, the prince was smiling.

“Then, you can be as handsome as His Highness with that sword!”

“Your Highness! Please lend me the sword. There’s a bitch I’m trying to get these days, but my charms don’t seem to work.”

The members continued giggling and babbling around, apparently the same as always.

But why... Bernardo Eli continued to feel his heart shrivel as he watched the first prince.

That feeling got even stronger when Baron Balson’s son brought up the story of Arwen Kirgayenne.

“Oh, I heard, did you break the flower of the Templar Knights? She was eye-catching since she started. She looks great even if she’s wearing armor, but how great is her flesh…”

“Hey.” The prince’s sharp voice cut him off. “Balson, right?”

Bernardo Eli pretended not to watch, but he looked at the scene through his water glass.

In the upside-down reflection, the prince was still smiling as he asked Balson’s son.

“Do you have a younger brother or a sister?”

“Oh, yes. I have one younger brother, Your Highness.”

“Okay, I’m glad to hear that,” the prince said as he picked up his metal cup. “Because the family line will not be cut off.”

“Y-your Highness? What are you- Ouch!”

The oldest son of Baron Balson grabbed his mouth and crashed to the floor.

The prince put down a bloody cup and stood.

This time, he took a wine bottle.

“From now on, your brother is your family’s successor.”

CHAPTER 16
NOT ALL OF THEM DISAPPEARED (3)

The man fell to the floor. He cried like a child, crying that 'it hurts' with his bloody mouth.

The prince approached him.

"Ouch!"

The prince kicked his side and turned him over, before grabbing his head by the hair and pulling it backward.

"Y-your Highness!"

The other club members screamed for the prince to stop. But before they could even act, the prince's hand moved.

A bottle full of alcohol smashed against the man's mouth.

"Aaaah!"

The screams came out a little late. Pieces of broken teeth and glass scattered on the floor.

Puck. Puck.

The prince shook his fist and drove it against the messy face.

The front teeth, which remained intact somehow, now broke off and bounced off the dirty, bloody floor.

Ruthless punches followed.

"En-enough, please, Your Highness."

The man, who was the successor of the Balson family, crawled over, trying to get away.

The prince released his hair. The head fell to the ground and banged on the floor.

Then, the prince kicked him.

The eldest son of the Balson family was thrown off to the corner by the force of the kicked.

Blood poured out of his mouth as he lay still, intermittently writhing in pain.

A little more, and he would die.

The prince would decide whether he would live or die.

And the decision was imminent.

From now on, your brother is the successor of the family, they remember him saying.

The prince had no intention of keeping Balson's son alive from the beginning.

Why?

What happened?

It was a common question on the people's minds.

Weren't they fussing around just earlier? Why did the prince lose his temper?

Everyone had to find out what made the prince lose his temper. They shouldn't make the same mistake. The other members looked at each other, exchanging confused gazes.

No one had an answer. They only saw embarrassment and doubt at each other's faces.

The prince looked around as he shook the blood from his fists.

"It is unbearable to think that you are this weak."

"…"

"…"

“Eli.”

“Yes, Your Highness?” Bernard Eli approached with caution.

“Didn’t you say I was going to be very happy today?”

A person is dying right by him, and his fists were covered in blood. However, the prince’s voice was as excited as if he came to a festival.

“Go and call my court knights.”

“As you say, Your Highness!”

Bernard Eli immediately fled the room.

“Every woman, get out.”

The pale women hurried to the door.

“I said, ‘women’.”

Some of the members trying to escape with the women stopped.

“If you want to go out, go out. But when you go out, you will become a woman.”

No one knew what the prince meant. Still, no one was able to leave the room with such an incomprehensible yet terrifying warning.

The sounds of armor clanging went louder as the court knights arrived.

* * *

“His Highness called for you,” the son of Count Eli suddenly came, pale as snow.

“His Highness?”

“There’s been a trivial quarrel inside…”

Even before the son of the count was done, Carls Juli fired quick instructions to the knights.

“You, and you, stay here and block the way. The rest rushes in with me! Above all, let’s ensure that His Highness’ safety is our top priority!”

The knights ran into the mansion.

They met women who were crying, their makeup messy.

They were fleeing from the room as if there was a wild beast inside.

The court knights ran through the hall, almost flying.

“His Highness is in there!”

Count Eli’s son pointed at the door at the end of the hall, unable to run with the knights’ dazzling pace.

The court knights entered the room with their hands on the handles of their swords.

Carls Juli’s eyes searched around the smoky room quickly.

There were men standing at the wall with disheveled clothes; one man was lying on the floor covered in blood; there were broken and smashed glasses and bottles.

He found the prince in the middle of it all.

“Your Highness! We are here!”

The knights drew their swords and surrounded the prince. Carls alertly glanced in all directions for any threat, and only then did he notice the expressions of the men standing by the walls.

Carls Juli narrowed his eyes.

Well?

These men, who were noblemen’s sons, were terrified for some reason.

They were like a flock of sheep fleeing a predator, finding themselves cornered against the walls.

It wasn't easy to judge the situation.

The prince looked peaceful and unharmed… then he saw that his hands were bloody.

"Your Highness! What happened here?"

"Not kneeling in front of the First Prince or showing any respect. Coveting the royal sword. What charges can be applied in this case?"

Carls responded with a stiff face.

"It is considered to be a rebellion if a member of a royal family is not provided proper respect, because it is an embarrassment to the whole royal family."

Having said that, he looked around with sharp eyes.

"Who would you have us bring down?"

"Everyone."

Carls, who intended to kill the guilty party, looked at the prince in surprise.

The noblemen's sons began crying out in protest.

"Your Highness! I never meant any harm!"

"Your Highness! Please forgive me with your generous heart!"

"Covering the royal sword! I was just admiring His Highness' dedication, and have no intention to take it!"

Some prayed for forgiveness, while others made excuses and pleadings.

However, the prince said, 'everyone'. The knights moved.

Wrathful knights kicked the men behind their knees and brought them to the ground.

"This man, then…" Carls asked the prince as he looked down at the bloody man who collapsed on the ground.

“He laughed at me and insulted my knight. He treated Arwen Kirgayenne as a prostitute.”

Meanwhile, the aristocrats continued shouting.

“Your Highness! Please forgive me!”

“Our family has been loyal to the royal family for generations! I will never disrespect you!”

Suddenly, a voice with a different tone popped out between the voices.

“Your Highness! You can’t treat the eldest sons of noblemen this way!”

The man who said it had dull eyes, obviously drunk with alcohol.

“I can let it go now… my family will treat you with constant loyalty. But if you really want to do this, you can…”

“What?” Even before the man was done speaking, the prince stepped forward and approached him.

“Go on.” He dared the man.

The eldest son of a country countess calmed down in an instant, amazingly.

“Your Highness, I mean…”

The prince laughed coldly.

“Your father’s neck will be on the line. His son just made a grave mistake.”

The man turned deathly pale. He realized that he had said too much. The spirit of alcohol was driven away by fear.

“Your Highness! I didn’t mean that I was just…”

“What are you doing?” the prince snapped at the knights. “Should I keep listening to this?”

Immediately, the knights took the man away.

Carls asked the prince, “What about Eli’s son?”

“Leave him alone. Just tell him to come to the palace.”

* * *

That night, the kingdom was in trouble.

Dozens of noble family members were detained in prisons.

Noble families stayed on the royal road and protested vigorously.

They asked the chief of royal defense what their sons’ crimes were.

Then, when they finally knew the reason, no one raised their voice again.

There were even witnesses to the charges of insulting the royal family.

The noblemen began to scatter away from the palace as if they were running away.

It was the same with Balson’s son.

His son was dying in a cold jail with his teeth falling apart, and his jaw smashed, but his father could not do anything. He begged for the wounds to be treated, but even that was not accepted.

The prince issued a strict order for his son’s detainment.

* * *

“As soon as you went outside the palace, you made trouble.”

The cold voice of the King echoed in the palace.

However, Prince Adrian Leonberger, who was the main cause of all this fuss, remained calm and casual.

“I was ignored and mocked in the face. Should I have stayed still?”

From the start, the king wished that his son wouldn’t go with that indecent crowd, but

he didn't want to listen. But now…

"Do you know what you did now?" he asked the prince.

It was complicated. Insulting the royal family would surely be punished, but this time, there were fourteen noble families involved. In addition, one of the members, a Count's son, was dying.

The backlash would be quite large. But according to the law, it must happen. Punishment, or the royal family's honor, would fall to the ground.

The troubled situation, of course, was not without a solution.

Perhaps it was a wake-up call.

The king, however, thought the prince didn't understand what he did or thought it through before doing it. He just wanted to cause trouble to the royal family, like before.

"You're not worried about the backlash," he reprimanded the prince.

"Your Majesty, these guys insulted our family's name. I know they will carry their noble families' names, too…"

The king narrowed his eyes as he watched the prince speak.

There was a wall between them. The prince has always treated his father with fear, avoidance, and silence.

"If they were kept carrying their families' names, the future of the kingdom will be in jeopardy."

"Sounds like a familiar story," the king teased but kept his serious tone.

"End their succession."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know you can do it," the prince remained stern and firm.

The king considered. After his son almost died, it seemed that something changed with

him.

However, the king waited silently. Depending on what the prince would say next, he could punish the prince for his attitude, or follow his advice.

“They have younger brothers and sisters…”

The king stared at the prince. The prince did not veer away from his gaze.

After a long time, the king opened his mouth.

“Look at me.”

It was not a punishment that came out of the king’s mouth.

The prince laughed and bowed his head.

* * *

Upon arriving from the Royal Palace, Adelia Bavaria was brought to my room.

She was incredibly anxious, and I didn’t know what to say.

“Let’s relax. I’m not trying to hurt you.”

I tried to speak as gently as possible, but it didn’t work.

I sighed and asked her to sit. Then, I asked her about her family.

“We’re an unfamiliar family with a name barely on the noble list. It is not a family that Your Highness may be interested in.”

It was the same answer I heard the day before.

She had no idea.

What a pity.

The history of glory has been erased. The great power and great pride were all gone.

However, something remained.

I looked over her head.

A status window appeared in the air.

There was a ‘heritage’ inherited by Adelia Bavaria.

CHAPTER 17
JUST A MESS (1)

The legacy of the ancestor who slew the mighty giant king has been passed on to Adelia Bavaria.

==========

□ Adelia Bayern [female, 17 years old], [maiden]

□ Aptitude. [Swordsmanship-S], [Mana Response-A]

□ Characteristics. [Butcher], [War Mania], [Tender], [Caring], [Servility]

==========

Class A is a genius that encompasses the kingdom; Class S is a genius that encompasses the entire continent.

Adelia Bavaria had an S-class skill.

But there was a problem.

Her personality status.

It was the weirdest I have seen.

She had the potential to be a great warrior with her skills.

But…

Her heart is soft [Tender].

She was exceptionally caring for others [Caring].

And she is dependent and passive [Servility].

“Your Highness?”

As I saw her looking at me with a deer-like expression, my confusion grew even worse.

Chaos. That’s what I feel right now.

What is this terrible hybrid?

I had a conflict.

Obviously, her potential was enormous.

But it was also an evil that must not be released.

Her [Butcher] and [War Mania] traits were the problem.

Obviously, Adelia Bayern’s potential was enormous. But it was also a taboo that should not be opened at the same time.

[Butcher] and [War mania] were the problem.

A woman with an unmatched potential could become a fanatic of blood and battle.

It could create a terrible disaster.

The descendant of the Bavarian family inherited the skills and the urge of her ancestors, but not the means to control them.

She did not have the [Cold Commander] and [Cold Reason] that her ancestor had.

That means she doesn’t have any means to control her own madness.

“Your Highness?”

Adelia Bavaria was deer-like in her expressions and movements.

Underneath it, a terrifying madness is sleeping.

Should I release that madness into the world?

I was worried.

But I was decided from the moment I saw her personality window.

“Adelia Bayern. Swear allegiance to me.”

Her S-class talent was a temptation that could never be denied.

“Me, Your Highness?”

“Be my knight!”

I commanded in a fierce voice.

At this moment, all I have to believe in was her characteristic of [Tender] and [Servility].

If she couldn’t control her own madness, I will forcefully grab her reins.

“But, why, Your Highness? I am just a trivial maid employed by the palace…”

She fell on the ground, near tears.

“Swear to me, now!”

“Your Highness, I can’t do it.”

“Why? Are you worried about your family? You must have entered the royal palace to earn for them. I will be responsible for your family.”

She shook. Her face was down so I couldn’t see her expression, but I could feel it.

She is in conflict.

“Your Highness, what do you want me to do?”

“Swear allegiance to me and serve me as your master. That is what I want from you.”

After a few more moments of prodding, she opened her mouth.

“Your Highness…” she smiled shyly, “are you really going to take care of my family?”

“Yes. I’ll take care of everything. If you want, you can have them move closer to the palace so you can arrange to see them anytime.”

In my answer, she brought her face down to the ground again.

“Adelia, the eldest daughter of the Bavarian family, swears allegiance to Prince Adrian Leonberger. I will devote my life to serving him as my master.”

Her oath was as crude as the pledge made by Arwen Kirgayenne, but she was sincere in her willingness to obey.

I was glad.

The potential of the S-grade skill is like a bud that blooms immediately once awakened.

If I don’t do this, she would always have that talent like a sharp needle within her, and one day, it could poke me instead.

It’s because of that fucking pig; I trembled as I saw the scars carved into her fine skin.

“Obey my orders in the future.”

I emphasized again and again. I had to imprint myself on her [Servility] trait.

“I will, Your Highness.”

Adelia Bavaria bowed and looked at me. It was a look that had something to say.

“Call your whole family. I will set aside a place for them to stay.”

“Thank you, Majesty. Thank you very much.”

She expressed her gratitude over and over again with a face that seemed to shed tears.

“Will there be a lot of them?”

“My parents died five years ago. I only have a younger brother, and an Aunt taking care of him along with my cousin.”

As she mentioned the words’ younger brother’, my eyes widened uncontrollably.

Her younger brother would also have inherited swordsmanship skills.

Maybe he had special talents, too.

When I asked about her younger brother, she looked proud.

“Unlike me, he is a very intelligent child,” she remarked.

I ordered her to call them as soon as she can.

* * *

I explained the situation to the court recorder whom I called.

“Your Highness, I have dumb ears and must have misheard, could you repeat it again, please?”

“Adelia Bavaria is now a member of the royal palace, under my name.”

“She is a maid under your name from the beginning…”

I shook my finger from side to side.

“No, I’m not talking about her employment. She is now a member of the royal palace.”

The old court recorder’s wrinkles deepened on his forehead.

It was a face that says he couldn’t understand what the hell I was saying.

“Do you like her? Your Highness?”

“No.” It would be crazy to be in a relationship with someone who had the characteristics of [Butcher] and [War Mania].

“Hmm…” the royal court recorder stared at me again.

It was obvious he didn’t believe my words. He stared at me as if I looked like a horny pig.

Oh, really. I frowned and started to say something, but the court recorder spoke faster.

“Then, I will fill her empty place with another maid. Your Highness, may I ask you what she will do in the future?”

His job was to record even the smallest thing in the royal palace. I bluntly responded.

“I will make her my personal knight.”

The royal court recorded looked as if he had just heard the strangest sound.”

“And her family is going to live near the royal road. Find a suitable home.”

The court recorder’s face screamed his thoughts.

She’s a concubine!

I can almost hear it.

“That’s it, get out!” I shouted at the annoying old man.

Soon after dismissing the court recorder, the King’s messenger came to me.

The king called me.

“Here I have a headache trying to rectify what you have done to the noblemen, and what are you doing? Bitching?”

As soon as he saw my face, he started to pour out swear words.

“You made the Kirgayenne’s daughter to your personal knight, and this time, you want a made to be another knight? Is this your new hobby?”

The king asked if I desired women with armor and swords.

Shit, this old man with a dirty mouth.

I made a lot of trouble and talked back to him as his words of rebuke continued.

“You should be ashamed!” Instead of explaining my side, I closed my mouth.

No one would believe it anyway.

After a long time, the king's nagging ended.

"I have to make sure that the palace won't get any more problems from you again."

"I'll have to make sure that the palace doesn't get complicated by you again."

With that warning, the king kicked me out.

"Oh, that sucks."

As if the nagging I received from the king wasn't enough, I found Uncle in my room when I went back.

Uncle clicked his tongue at me and turned around, annoying me further.

"Why are you here again?" I asked him, but he didn't answer and left.

After Uncle, the Third Prince also came.

"Making a maid a knight? Truly, my brother?"

"Please just go away."

Fortunately, he didn't stay long.

I was looking forward to seeing them watch a great knight to be born under my hands.

As I prepared to rest, I heard the announcement outside my room.

"The Queen…"

Oh, shit!

Why did the Queen have to come when I was already lying down to rest?

"Now, you seemed to be back to your old ways… what did you do those noblemen… do you know how great Your Majesty's troubles are…"

The nagging continued.

“As a prince, you must have an awareness of your position. Indeed, being the eldest…”

In a way, it was good that the Queen spoke gently. She rarely spoke harshly.

“Trust your mother. This time, the same thing that happened last time will not happen.”

I was curious at her words, but I didn’t want to ask because the conversation would be longer.

Eventually, she left.

Then, I called Adelia.

“Why hasn’t Eli come yet?” I complained to her.

It was insensitive of him to keep me waiting.

“Should we send a message?” she asked.

“Uh, no. It’s too late for that.”

However, Adelia took a piece of paper and started writing. I went and took it out of her hands.

“You are not a maid anymore.”

I forced her to sit down.

“Your Highness?”

“Tomorrow, we will learn to fence. We will study it and eventually learn other skills.”

She looked a little bit excited. “Perhaps… will I learn mana, too?”

It seemed that she had picked something up from the knights.

She was thinking about mana chains, but I have another idea.

“Uh, someday.”

She will learn mana, but not the way she was expecting.

“So, we will get started soon,” I declared.

The world has completely forgotten the way of the sword.

But I didn’t.

And I would make her remember, too.

The footsteps she has to take.

The sword dancing at her fingertips.

The sound of her heart that thumped violently.

I remember everything.

CHAPTER 18
JUST A MESS (2)

[Adelia Bavaria felt mana.]

[You succeeded in imprinting mana on Adelia Bavaria.]

[Mana successfully settled in the body of Adelia Bavaria.]

[A mana heart was created in the body of Adelia Bavaria.]

The first engraving and creation of the mana heart were processed quickly.

"Ah…"

Adelia glanced down at her heart, raised her hand to touch it, and stayed still for a long time.

It must feel strange for her. Mana has settled in her body.

I was satisfied looking at her image, but I suddenly felt dizzy.

Um…

There was no power left inside at all.

My own mana heart was empty. My head hurt.

It was my first attempt to do it as a human, not as a sword, so it consumed too much power.

The world was spinning.

"Your Highness?"

I heard Adelia's voice. I tried to raise my head. I could see her pale face looking at me.

“Your Highness? Are you okay?!”

“I am okay. Just a little tired…”

It hurts my pride to get so weak after making a mana heart. However, my body didn’t seem to care about my pride.

My legs felt weak, and I had to sit down. Fortunately, a chair was right behind me.

If there wasn’t, it would have been a big crash.

“Well, I just need to rest a little…” I behaved as if I was going to sit in that chair from the beginning.

“Your Highness, because of humble me…”

Adelia looked at me with a complicated expression. Her face seemed to be impressed.

I looked at her eyes. Her pupils were like a deer’s.

There was also a small glow that was not there before.

It was evident that the seeds I planted were successfully established.

With a sigh of relief, I told her what to do.

“What I just did is to create your mana heart. Whenever you can, try to do practice with it.”

She nodded.

It was now Adelia’s job to make the seed sprout.

I was looking forward to watching her do it.

“Go home. That’s it for today.”

Adelia hesitated. It seemed that she had something to say.

“What is it?” I prodded her.

“I will serve you with all my heart. Thank you once again.”

I smiled and replied,

“Just never forget that I am your master.”

I am afraid of what could happen if she does forget, really.

* * *

Three days have passed since I’ve made a mana heart for Adelia.

She quickly adapted to it, as if proving her A-class talent, and is now able to run mana alone without my help.

Meanwhile, Bernard Eli still hasn’t come.

Carls tried to explain the situation. “It is said that it is not that he doesn’t want to come…”

Bernardo Eli was protected (more likely, detained) by the Royal Guards as a witness to the disturbance.

“His Majesty has ordered him not to meet anyone until the day of the trial.”

It was natural that he couldn’t come.

“So, do I have to go on trial, too?”

Carls shook his head.

“The royal family never stands on trial. Perhaps His Majesty will choose a suitable representative to take your place. Your Highness doesn’t have to worry about it.”

“That’s good! It’s really annoying.”

Carls stared at me. I sent him out and called Adelia.

“From today on, you will join me at practice. Go and change to comfortable clothes.”

I headed to the training hall.

Uncle was inside, pretending not to have seen me.

“Huh.”

The fact that I had been stuck inside a room with Adelia while I made her mana heart seemed to be misunderstood. The First Prince is known around the country as a horny one.

“Your Highness,” Adelia arrived quickly, wearing pants and a shirt.

I looked at her. “What are you doing? Start running! Ten turns around the hall.”

Adelia hesitated a little bit, then started running.

“What are you doing now?” Uncle asked me in a stiff voice.

“Oh, I thought you hadn’t noticed me. You were relaxing,” I replied eagerly as I caught a wooden sword he tossed.

“That child…” His gaze remained fixed to Adelia.

“I told you before. I’m going to make her a knight.”

He seemed fed up after hearing the words too many times. His expression turned cold.

“Is making a knight so trivial in your eyes?” He started to pour out.

“Have you ever thought about so many apprentices trying to become knights? Do you know how your actions will seem to them?”

“Ah-oh! I just did it twice, so why are you getting sentimental?”

I was fed up with the endless nagging. “If you don’t like it, then what are you doing here? You shouldn’t have come if you don’t want to see me.”

“I didn’t come because I wanted to come. It’s because of your mother!”

“Oh, please.”

Court knights intervened. “Count Balahard, please lower your voice and calm down.”

Uncle looked embarrassed. It seemed embarrassing to have a rude nephew.

On the other hand, I felt nothing.

I'm already screwed from the beginning. No matter what I did, everyone saw it as a mess.

It's nothing new.

Even the court knights looked at me the same.

I like it this way.

I have a reputation for being a frustration, and I will turn it around.

Adelia soon joined us, breathless, and saw the commotion between Uncle and me.

Uncle cursed and stepped away, watching us with his arms folded.

"Your Highness, it's my fault. Because of me…"

"No, why are you apologizing?" I told her, then gave her a wooden sword.

"Today, let's train lightly."

I showed her how to hold the swords and demonstrated some postures.

Today, I planned on doing just that.

But I couldn't.

She was taking the lessons like a cotton ball sucking water.

After only a few demonstrations, she learned the basics.

"Now, what's next?" she asked.

I don't know if I'm doing the right thing, and her ancestor naturally came to my mind as I watched her.

Agnes was also a monster like this.

When I first met her, she was only fifteen. A young girl, who knew nothing, slew three men with a sword at her first try.

Adelia inherited the same talents that she had.

I taught her some more moves.

These were basic moves according to her current physical condition.

Chopping, stabbing, pulling.

She did the same thing I did in just three attempts.

“Your Highness, next?”

Adelia’s eyes were pleading.

I taught her some more. These were also basics, but more difficult for beginners.

She imitated them as if they were boring.

Her eyes turned to me again. I frowned.

When I saw that she was effortlessly doing the movements I had taught her, I was kind of happy.

However, something in my mind flashed.

She will overtake me, unconditionally.

I have to grow stronger than her.

The characteristic of [Servility] was obedience to the strong.

She would not respect someone weaker than herself.

“Hmm…”

As I stood there thoughtfully, I heard a cough. Uncle was approaching us.

“Why?” I asked him. I thought his nagging would start again.

But his attitude was strange this time.

He was watching Adelia with a light on his eyes.

I’ve never seen him look at me like that.

There was surprise in his eyes, definitely. Or greed. Or both.

Uncle’s eyes are burning.

“What are you going to do?” I blocked him.

Ha! Those eyes were completely obsessed.

If I had the power to recognize the other’s talents, Uncle surely could see it, too.

It was not hard to see that Adelia was a genius.

Of course, I had no intention of letting others steal her talent.

“She is my knight,” I told Uncle.

He frowned. “What can you do to her?”

I’ve only trained with the sword for a few months; his eyes seemed to be pointing out.

“You cannot afford her,” he said bluntly.

I laughed.

“If I can’t handle her, no one else can.”

“You are mad,” Uncle whispered strongly.

It was quiet enough for the court knights not to notice it but strong enough to break a man’s will.

If I was the First Prince of old, I would have resigned quickly, trembling even.

But I wasn't a mess like him.

"She is mine."

I stared back.

I have a weak prince's body, but the soul of a sword that slew a dragon and countless other beings.

CHAPTER 19
THE REAL THING IS DIFFERENT (1)

How much soul should I take out to overshadow Uncle's soul, the swordmaster of this era?

200 years? 300 years? 500 years?

No. 100 years will do.

What I pulled out was only a fraction of the years I had lived.

That alone allowed me to completely overpower his presence.

Uncle's eyes widened. His face was full of astonishment and disbelief.

Whether they noticed the quiet battle we're having, the court knights narrowed their eyes to watch me, Uncle, and Adelia, who had a frightened face.

It looked unreal.

"I hate it when someone takes what's mine," I whispered.

There is no vigor or vitality in my voice.

The only thing I felt was the chill that came from my soul.

My body trembled. My teeth chattered.

It was a hot season, but I felt cold.

That was a sign.

This weak body is being eroded by the coldness and darkness that came with my soul.

I quickly buried the part of my soul that I had awakened, before it could eat this body

up.

“One ordinary knight…”

Uncle was breathing roughly as he gazed at my eyes deeply.

“One excellent knight can save a hundred soldiers… No. A thousand.”

His voice and eyes were imposing, placing me under pressure.

There was a great sense of responsibility in him as the commander of the North.

He had a great cause.

“Soon, there will be a harsh winter. Hungry monsters will cross the border…”

“No.”

His face had a broken expression. He didn’t think I would immediately reject him.

“But she could save countless lives.”

“I said, no.”

My answer was the same.

His cause was his, not mine.

I couldn’t sympathize with him. I had no intention of giving up something that has this great value.

“You value her…”

“Sir Count Balahard,” Adelia spoke, cutting Uncle off.

It was surprising that she would speak to Uncle, who was considered her superior.

But there was something else more surprising.

Her purple eyes have a dry, cold look as she stared back at Uncle.

“Why don’t you ask me directly?”

Uncle, who had no reason not to, asked her.

“Would you go with me to the North?”

“I have no intention of leaving His Highness’ side.”

For Adelia, there was no cause greater than I.

“I have my own body and mind,” she added.

I couldn’t help it. I laughed, and it sounded hostile.

It was worthwhile to raise my soul’s presence, even though I knew my body wouldn’t be able to handle it.

Adelia, the maniac, the shy but dependable woman.

[Servility] is only meant to be submissive to a higher-ranking being.

And my soul was enough to impress on her who the real ‘Master’ was.

“I cannot follow your words,” Adelia told Uncle.

He looked shocked because his noble cause has just been rejected twice.

I chuckled once more as Uncle looked exasperated.

“Thousand of lives are at stake! How can you be so rash!”

“I’m not worried about this. Why don’t you get out of the palace and find a thousand soldiers?”

Uncle stared at my blatant remark.

I coughed from too much chuckling.

“We’re not done with this. We’ll sort it out soon.”

At this point, it was important to draw the line.

“The request for Adelia is already over. In fact, there is no longer a reason why you need to come here every day.”

The Queen asked him to come for my discipline.

Now, I don’t get into foolish troubles, and I’m in a state of losing weight.

“But if you are willing to come, I will welcome you as a guest. But you will be expected to be as courteous as a guest.”

Don’t nag, don’t look at Adelia.

Uncle frowned by my condition and looked at Adelia with a lot of regrets.

* * *

Even after being so embarrassed, Uncle continued to visit the palace daily.

It was to watch Adelia.

However, Adelia treated him with little to no respect. Uncle grumbled around her.

It was too pathetic that even I felt sorry for him and chose not to say anything.

Occasionally, Uncle looked at me with a sulky face.

He seemed to want to say something, but he’s holding it back.

About two weeks after that, Uncle, who was usually silent, approached us in the training hall.

“What have you been teaching her?” he asked, looking disgusted.

Hmm… definitely, her posture was not good.

“Adelia, stretch out your elbows,” I told her.

Immediately, she corrected her posture.

“Lean your shoulders back a little.”

“Stare forward.”

Uncle cleared his throat meaningfully and stepped away.

I shook my head. I know what that meant.

Adelia was adjusting to the sword too quickly. At this pace, I would not be able to lead her anymore soon.

“Hoo!”

She took a deep breath. Aura gathered at the tip of her sword as she exhaled.

She repeated the action, slowly but surely, until a clear noise rang out.

Woo Woo Woo!

“Well?” Adelia turned and looked at me while her sword was shining.

“Uh, good job.”

She laughed shyly at my compliment.

Soon, the light from the sword faded.

She did well. But I couldn’t laugh.

I taught her how to put mana in a sword. However, I did not expect her to succeed in such a short time.

Even if she did not have enough mana yet to keep it running, she was successful.

It was terrifying progress.

I’m really nervous like a sword-wielding maniac is chasing me.

Goosebumps rose on my neck.

“You must not…”

I heard Uncle’s voice. When I turned my head, I saw his stiff expression.

“Mana heart…” It was obvious that he was trying not to speak, but blurted it out anyway.

“Why?” I asked him loudly.

“Isn’t it enough that you use that trashy technique alone? Why did you have to teach it to her?”

I pointed at the entrance with my finger. “Go. Leave!”

As I screamed at him angrily, Uncle spoke once more.

“She had incredible potential that you couldn’t have imagined. You ruined it.”

His voice was calm, but the anger contained in it was deeper than before.

I pointed to the entrance once more instead of answering.

“Why, will you have me dragged out?”

I stood up to call the court knights, but Uncle has already turned and started walking away.

As I watched him while clicking my tongue, Adelia approached me and asked.

“The technique you taught me was trash?”

I shook my head.

“No. Never.”

The Mana Heart sitting at her chest was exactly the same as that of her ancestor, Agnes Bavaria.

Even though it is small and insignificant now, it can exert tremendous power as her ancestors did in the past.

“But why does Sir Count speak of it that way?”

She had a lot of questions today than usual. Still, she seems to be highly motivated when talking about swords, as expected from a descendant of ancestors known for excellent swordsmanship.

“I don’t know…” I said as I watched Uncle disappear from a distance.

“People of this era have completely forgotten what the real mana heart is like.”

It was mana hearts that have defeated dragons and giant kings.

Now, it is treated as trash.

It was pitiful.

“If they hadn’t forgotten, they wouldn’t treat it that way.”

“I see.”

I’m not sure she understood, but she looked as if she believed me.

“Soon, you will know.”

I didn’t doubt that the day she would see it would come soon.

The day will come much faster than I thought.

After a week, Uncle came back, still seething with anger.

“Would you like me to never come back?”

He had a black wooden sword in his hand.

“Then, raise your sword.

He stared at me quietly.

“Prove yourself. Prove that you are not wrong.”

He raised his wooden sword.

“I will only use one ring. If you can make me move even half a footstep, you win. Then, I’ll admit defeat.”

I grinned. “What would you like to bet? In exchange for your wish.”

“If you want me to pass on the family’s secret, I will. If you want something else, I will also listen.”

I shook my head.

“It’s not what I want.”

“Whatever it is you want, then.”

I laughed at his words.

“Let’s finish the battle first,” I said.

This is going to be fun.

CHAPTER 20
THE REAL THING IS DIFFERENT (2)

The training room was still. Uncle was breathing in a relaxed manner.

I gripped my sword, switching it from the left hand to the right, as I hovered around him.

I took my breath carefully.

“Do you need more time?” He looked like he wanted to yawn. It was a clear provocation.

I gladly accepted the provocation.

Tak tak-!

I dragged the sword against the floor as I charged to him.

Uncle twisted his upper body, leaving my attack in vain.

“Ah, for your first attack, you were aiming for my throat. Dangerous.”

My second attack came as he was speaking. This time, it was a swing aimed for his shoulders.

Again, it was avoided easily.

I raised my sword again.

Poke, draw, swing, jab repeatedly, for a long time.

Half of my attacks have been avoided.

The other half was blocked.

“Your physical strength is not enough,” he said as he raised his sword vertically.

He looked like a predator lying down in the grass, waiting for a prey.

“Take out your mana,” he challenged.

Instead of answering, I looked around.

Adelia and the court knights, including other people who have arrived from the royal palace, were watching Uncle and me.

Perhaps, what Uncle wants to happen is for me to embarrass myself in front of them.

It would be a very miserable picture.

Stay calm; stay calm.

I shook my sword vigorously and stepped back.

Whoo.

I took a deep breath while letting my arms relax, letting the sword dangle.

“You’re already giving up?” Uncle teased.

“No way,” I replied quickly and stared at him.

I have to admit it. Uncle is strong.

Now, that strong Uncle is looking for an opportunity. He was waiting for me to use my mana heart.

To give me a more terrible defeat.

It could be a lesson he wanted to give to his nephew who made a wrong decision, or to an unruly man who ruined a genius. Maybe both.

He had a good motive.

What is important now is that as soon as I activate the mana heart, things will be going according to Uncle’s will.

I glanced down. The mana heart, sitting at my chest, is now quite heavy.

It had been gathering mana throughout my battle with Uncle.

But that was not enough.

Uncle said that he would only use one ring, but he's not like the others.

Arwen Kirgayenne, who was as strong as common knights, used mana heart, but Uncle is leagues away from her in terms of strength.

It's a crisis.

But I wasn't worried.

"Oh, you're smiling?"

Uncle laughed. It was disgusting.

"Isn't it strange?" I asked him.

"400 years ago, numerous knights achieved unbelievable feats. They all had mana hearts. Even the founder of this country had it."

"Oh, I don't think you can prove yourself with your sword, so you're arguing with your words."

Despite his blatant mockery, I ignored him and continued.

"It's not fair for a skill used by all the great knights to be treated like garbage."

Uncle frowned. "Mana chains, the descendants of mana hearts, proved to be stronger."

"That's what everyone else thinks."

"What are you talking about?"

"My thoughts are different," I replied. "Mana hearts are gone not because chains are stronger, but because their owners are weaker."

Uncle considered it and shrugged. I continued to explain.

“Their mana hearts were not the same as their ancestors. There are high-quality and low-quality mana hearts. None of the masters who were defeated by quad-chain knights had a mana heart of honor.”

There was indeed a division between mana hearts. However, the real criterion that distinguishes one from the other is not efficiency or power.

“Have you ever heard of Muhun-si?” I asked him.

Uncle’s face looked obviously annoyed.

“This is a place to test our swords, not a place where we talk about songs or poems.”

He didn’t understand what I was talking about, obviously.

“You said mana hearts were a low-class skill that only mercenaries use. You’d learn a lot from that song.”

As the saying goes, it’s better to show once than to explain a hundred times.

I raised my sword.

“Come on,” he murmured.

In response, I said a line from Muhun-si.

“One hundred victories are my pride, my strength.”

“What?”

“It sings of a hundred victories of a practitioner who dreams of becoming a knight.”

『[Muhun-si] was created.』

Achievements are being imprinted on the mana heart.

The imprinted achievements become martial arts.

『[The ordinary poem] was created: [Dalian Poetry] 』

『The effect of [Dalian Poetry] was activated.』

The small achievements that I have built up over the past half-year have been imprinted on the mana heart.

I hit the ground and lowered my sword.

As I ran, my wooden blade gathered mana, and Uncle frowned as he raised his sword.

Woo woo woo woo-!

The peculiar sound of a mana-filled blade rang in the room.

Bang-!

Our swords clashed with an intense impact.

“I endured a thousand waves while competing a hundred times.”

At the same time, a line from the song rang in my head. The shockwaves from the impact that swept through my limbs disappeared in an instant.

This is nothing.

I smiled.

In order to obtain this poem, I needed to fight more than a hundred times and suffer attacks a thousand times.

I flew towards him again. Mana flowed through my sword without any break.

Bang-!

In an instant, I’ve slashed at him with a dozen times more power than before.

“Ha!”

Uncle’s expression betrayed his admiration. I hovered around him, scheming my next

attack.

Bang-!

A small question arises on his face.

Bang-!

He looked more confused.

Bang-!

It turned to disbelief.

“How…?”

“Why? Did you think that I’d vomit blood again?”

Our swords clashed once more.

Kwajik-!

The collision was more intense than before. However, I didn’t feel the impact on my limbs. I cannot get hurt by the shockwaves.

Uncle stared at me.

“How…”

“I told you. Mana hearts are not all the same.”

“You’re getting lucky.”

Perhaps, my words have touched a nerve.

He took an offensive position.

In a quick instant, I had to block his blade from hitting my nose.

Bang-!

With the help of Muhun-si, I can keep using mana without the pain of regurgitation, but Uncle is still a tough opponent for me.

In a moment, our swords clashed a dozen times.

Bang-!

He kept coming again and again.

Bang-!

The light in his eyes was slowly fading. At a certain point, it became as cold as when we started fighting.

Bang-!

As it did, his swordsmanship got more intense.

Kwajik-!

His sword hit my shoulder. I felt the impact through my gear and jumped back, grabbing my shoulder.

As one of our conditions is that he would not take his feet off from their position, he did not chase me.

“Okay…”

“You have done well, so far,” he said, with little admiration.

I stared at his face as I endured the pain in my shoulder.

Muhun-si raises my power against powerful enemies and allows my body to exceed its limits.

“400 years ago, the knights made a big mistake. They wiped out their enemies and did not leave some for their descendants. Hence, their descendants didn’t learn.”

Knights of 400 years ago had enough poetry to reach [Mythic] or [Hero] ratings.

Poetry is learned and developed through swordsmanship, kindness, honor.

However, the advancements in metallurgy made people forget.

Dragons? Giant Kings?

Their faith disappeared.

They treated poetry as terrible songs or endless stories.

For anyone, Muhun-si was just a cheap song.

Those who believed must have attempted to create new poems. However, the only thing they can fight against were other humans.

For example, the victory won by the Knights of the Heat or the achievement of defeating a hundred soldiers alone.

No one would have achieved [Mythic] or [Hero] ratings with those.

Soon, all the mana heart-users would have been wiped out or given up.

“You’re talking about what happened a long time ago. You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” Uncle said with obvious annoyance.

“Let’s finish this futile battle,” he said as he raised his sword

Alas! He had good technique, but with mana chains, he cannot reach Transcendence.

Bale Balahard. Arrogant and ignorant.

“You have to know… how great it is that you have lost.”

My sword let out a sharp cry as mana covered it.

Woo woo woo-!

Why don’t I take out that magnificent skill?

I took a step and sung a line.

“I cut the scales of the dragon that cannot be cut by any sword, and drink its hot blood.”

『Sings [The Poem of the Dragon Slayer]. 』

『You can’t handle the poetry with your current abilities. 』

『Part of the poem is omitted.』

『Part of the poem is omitted.』

『Part of the poem is omitted.』

『You can only use one verse of the poem. 』

A short song rang in my head.

CHAPTER 21
THE REAL THING IS DIFFERENT (3)

My nephew, talking about strange things, was very annoying.

But there was something else that really offended me.

Those eyes. That look.

At first, I couldn't figure out what that twisted look meant.

It was a gaze that I had never seen before, an uncomfortable expression I have never encountered.

Pity.

It was with pity that my nephew stared at me.

I couldn't understand it.

The distinction between the weak and the strong is clear.

Everyone who is watching who between us is strong and who is weak.

If someone was to be pitied, it was his nephew.

But what is with that gaze?

Why does he look like a strong man that looks down on the weak?

"With mana chains, you cannot reach Transcendence," I heard him say.

What's worse, I felt that I was shaking as I listened to him.

"You have to know… how great it is that you have lost."

The moment I heard his dry voice, my chest slumped. I felt like I had lost something important.

There was a feeling of emptiness in my chest.

I struggled with confusing emotions and grabbed my sword.

I'm going to end this with a single blow.

Both the battle and the delusion in my heart.

Suddenly, an unknown song came out of my nephew's mouth.

"I cut the scales of the dragon that cannot be cut by any sword, and drink its hot blood."

My heart shook and tightened as I listened to the song he hummed.

Woo woo woo-!

I filled my sword with mana from one ring as I watched his sword glow with mana.

It was then…

Click-!

In an instant, my nephew's untrained sword was crushing against mine.

If I blocked it a split-second too late, it would have bit my cheeks.

I watched my wooden sword get grounded little by little with his strong drive.

Half my sword was reduced to wood chips falling on the ground, bit by bit.

His blade would soon reach my face.

Unconsciously, my rings started spinning.

One. Two. Three.

Finally, the last one spun, too.

Bang-!

My nephew was thrown backward, crashing to the floor.

“Your Highness!”

The court knights began rushing in, but we’re stopped by my nephew’s hand.

“I’m fine!”

He stumbled to his feet and spat blood.

“You said you’d only use one ring,” he smiled, exposing bloody teeth.

Confused eyes inside the room all turned to me.

There was a blade of light rising about a meter or so from my hand.

It was the Aura Blade, which appeared only when four rings were activated.

I could not believe my eyes.

Unconsciously, I have used the Aura Blade just to stop a wooden sword.

I immediately turned off the Aura Blade in shock.

Unbelievable.

Mana hearts are of lower quality than mana rings. It was the truth. It was common sense.

However, common sense was denied in front of me.

By my nephew.

Who has not even had a full year of swordsmanship training.

My expression sank even more.

I thought I could finish this quickly, but in the end, I have ended nothing.

Not my nephew. Not the delusions.

“Count Bale Balahard,” I heard him say. “You lost.”

His voice was sharp.

Then, he collapsed.

“Your Highness!”

Court knights rushed in to help him.

I watched the scene helplessly, not knowing what to say or do next.

* * *

I had a terrible nightmare.

In my dreams, I was a slave without any senses except for sight and hearing.

It was so vivid. I thought it was not a dream.

When I woke up, I felt terrible discomfort.

My head was a mess. I didn’t know whether I was a sword or a human.

“Okay.”

If it wasn’t for the physical pain I felt in my muscles; I would have been pushing the boundaries between reality and unreality for a longer time.

The nightmare was a price for unreasonably pulling out the power of Muhun-si.

So was the pain in my muscles. They seem to be tearing apart.

Above all, I have a splitting headache.

I don’t think I will recover for a while.

I was prepared for this, however.

The Poem of the Dragon Slayer was a [Myth] level song.

I have not even used the entire verse available.

Only three phrases in a single verse.

My body was too weak.

“One hundred victories are my pride, my strength.”

“I endured a thousand waves while competing a hundred times.”

The first verse that I wove myself. Another line has been added to it.

“I will be proud in front of the bigger wave.”

『The rating of [Dalian Poetry] has risen slightly』

Every new line will become my strength.

“Now, I’m going to use it.”

I can’t use the Poem of the Dragonslayer at every battle and suffer these results every time.

In that sense, [Dalian Poetry] was the perfect poem for me right now.

There is a knife for cutting chicken, and a knife for cutting cattle.

With the upcoming sparring against the Third Prince, [Dalian Poetry] would be enough.

“Your Highness?”

Adelia caught me giggling.

“Hmm.” I coughed to cover it up, then looked at her.

I didn’t see she was beside me because my eyes were only half-open.

It must have been strange for her. She laughed a little.

She was not as shy as she was in the past. Her spirit was stronger now.

It has been rewarding to continually engrave my presence on her.

“I’m glad you’re awake now, Your Highness.”

“I didn’t want to… kidding. How much time has passed?”

“Five days.”

It seems that the aftereffect of Muhun-si was bigger than I thought.

I asked her what had happened while I was asleep.

“There was turmoil when you fell unconscious. At that time, your condition was so critical…”

Adelia explained the situation.

The muscles on both arms turned blue, and I have kept vomiting blood.

She said there had been quite a fuss, and that priests were summoned to stop the blood and return the skin color to its original form.

“It was the first time I saw the Queen so angry,” she continued

When the Queen appeared, she took one look at me and grabbed Uncle by the ears.

The Queen’s anger grew even more, when Carls stood up and confessed the brutality of Uncle, who promised to use only one ring but ended up mobilizing the Aura Blade.

My stomach hurt from laughing as I listened to Adelia.

“Tell me more, more!” I asked her as I giggled.

Adelia calmly explained the rest of the story.

The Queen dragged Uncle outside, and after a while, she returned to check my condition but didn’t stay long.

“Sir Bale Balahard was sent out of the palace.”

“Of course, he should be. He pulled out the Aura Blade on me.”

“But before he left, he left me a message for you.”

“Don’t tell me yet. I need a break.”

I really had to rest.

Excessive use of Muhun-si affects not only the body, so it was necessary to be absolutely stable for a while.

If I don’t recover completely, I will pay a terrible price.

First, the memories of the reality and the past were mixed up.

At some point, the boundary of reality completely collapses, and it becomes an unending madness.

Moments of frustration and moments of glory are endlessly replayed. Terrible nightmares or dazzling glory.

It was something I absolutely wanted to avoid. I became trapped in the memories of when I was a sword.

“Your Highness, I have prepared some soup, so take care of your hunger.”

It wasn’t until I heard that from Adelia that I realized that I haven’t eaten for five days.

I ate the soup heartily.

After filling my stomach, I had a job to do.

“Adelia, how much have you heard from me and my uncle’s conversation that day?”

“I heard it all. Muhun-si, knights from 400 years ago made a mistake…”

I began to tell her the story that I have put off.

I told her about her ancestor and about Muhun-si.

While she was dubious about the fact that her ancestor was such a great knight, she was curious about Muhun-si.

“I will teach you a very special poem. But not now,” I promised her.

After all, Agnes Bavaria’s poem was as great as the Poem of the Dragon Slayer.

However, if Adelia takes it on without enough preparation, it would kill her.

She had S-class swordsmanship and A-class mana response, but her soul rating is not proportional to her physical talent.

Then, there is one thing we can do for now.

To make Adelia weave her own poem, just like I did with [Dalian Poetry].

“So… what do you want to do with your sword?”

She thought hard. She told me she hadn’t thought about it yet.

She looked ashamed that she didn’t have any ambition.

“So, start thinking about it now,” I told her.

Her brows furrowed in concentration for a while, and then she responded.

“I really want to be a knight.”

Adelia looked straight at me with a persistent gaze.

Her eyes shone.

CHAPTER 22
EVERYONE IS NOT THE SAME AS A FOOL (1)

Adelia fell silent after I revealed my aspirations.

"You don't have to decide now," I told her. "You can think about it and tell me later."

But instead, she opened her mouth again.

"Well, if I become a knight…" she trailed off.

"What? What if you become a knight?"

"…I will."

Her head was down, and her voice was a sound tinier than a mosquito's wings.

"What?" I asked her again.

At my words, she raised her head.

"I will be Your Highness' sword."

At the end of her speech, a strange burst of wind seemed to break out.

"Ah…"

I knew what it was.

Some Muhun-si poetry begins with the first step across the plain, while others begin with the sound of a charge trumpet.

In some stories, the poetry begins with an oath.

"I will live for Your Highness for the rest of my life, and I will give my all."

That's how Adelia's poetry began.

『Adelia Bavaria offers [Poem of Subordination].』

And sometimes, one's Muhun-si affects the others.

『A new [Muhun-si] has been created.』

『The poem of [Ordinary Character] and [The Poem of Dominance] were created.』

Just like now.

"Huh."

I laughed in surprise.

It was ridiculous.

I couldn't even imagine that the descendants of Agnes Bavaria, one of the greatest swordsmen, would weave a [Poem of Subordination].

However, strong Adelia was and will be, she had the characteristic of [Servility].

If Agnes learns about this, she will pass out.

I stared at Adelia. There seemed to be no change in her appearance.

It usually takes some time for someone to realize his or her poetry.

In particular, Adelia's oath was accompanied by a prerequisite: "if I become a knight."

Perhaps, it would be after she becomes a knight that the Muhun-si would be realized.

"Your Highness?"

As I stared at herself silently, she bowed her head with an embarrassed face.

"Thanks," I told her.

"Well, Your Highness. It wasn't much."

“No, thank you very much.”

I got so much because of you.

Having a new Muhun-si from her oath was great, but the real profit is much greater.

It was the fact that her growth would benefit me very much.

[Poetry of Subjugation] is a hymn dedicated to the master, and it would benefit me as much as her.

Of course, we both didn’t know yet how her poem would benefit me.

The effect varies greatly depending on how the owner of the poem interprets it, and what kind of heart she has.

Now, there was nothing to do but wait until her S-class swordsmanship aptitude and A-class mana aptitude are in full bloom.

And…

“Oh, I’m so sleepy,” I blurted out weakly.

First, I had to sleep.

I passed out quickly.

* * *

When I woke up again, Adelia was still standing by my side. I woke up quietly as I watched her doze on the chair next to the bed.

“Well?”

I wasn’t feeling as bad as I thought. I thought I’d suffer from aftereffects for at least a few more days.

Is it because of the [Poem of Subordination]?

I didn’t think that an [Ordinary] poem could alleviate the aftereffects of a [Myth] poem.

“Your Highness?”

Adelia looked at me with half-open eyes, then got up from her seat.

“I will bring water to wash your face with, and a light meal.”

She disappeared without even waiting for my answer.

“Hmm.”

As Adelia disappeared, I stood in front of the mirror.

“Hoh.”

I admired my reflection.

My face has become slimmer due to unintentional fasting for several days, and it looks surprisingly bright. The only fault I could find was my thin lips and eyes that seemed tired.

Still, I look totally different.

“Well, it’s like I’ve been reborn.”

I was laughing at my own joke when Adelia returned.

However, there was someone else with her.

I frowned.

An unwelcome guest.

The queen, the person I avoided the most in the royal palace, was with Adelia.

“Ian, where does it hurt? Why are you standing up already?”

I laughed awkwardly as her simmering show of motherhood engulfed me. It was scary.

It would have been better if she treated me like the king does, but she always looked at me with warm eyes.

Just like I do with the king, I gritted my teeth. Acting like a good son hurt my pride.

“Ugh, my head…” I closed my eyes, hoping it was a decent performance.

“Come, lie down. Lie down, and have a good rest. Your mother will be by your side today.”

She said in a calm, soothing tone, but her words made me uncomfortable.

It was terrible to imagine being with the queen all day.

“Oh no, I would be fine,” I told her.

The queen sighed.

“Why the hell is my son so shy to his own mother?”

Because I’m not your son.

Of course, I couldn’t tell her the truth, so I just sighed.

While we were silent, Adelia stepped closer.

“Your Highness, I will help you cleanse your face.”

Adelia handed me a silver tray. As I splashed my face with cold water, I glanced at the queen’s face.

She looks like she had something to say.

As expected –

“Do you hate your Uncle?”

The queen brought out the business.

“I don’t think your Uncle was really trying to harm you. He’s just clumsy and clunky, so he must have done that unintentionally. So, don’t blame your Uncle too much.”

For a long time, the queen made a speech in support of Uncle.

He was a person who lived with swords and troops for a long time rather than people, and he forgot how to treat his own blood and flesh as he hung out with rough men.

In the end, the point was that the Uncle was a social misfit.

“So, if you have hard feelings, shake it off.”

“I don’t.”

“Why? He struck you so violently, and he always nags at you. It would be lying to say you didn’t hate him.”

“No, I really don’t.”

It wasn’t a lie.

I didn’t blame Uncle at all.

In the first place, I didn’t expect anything from him. He was just a nuisance to me.

Besides, I was in a state where I could have hurt him as well.

And I did, although not physically.

He broke his word and used four rings. It would have hurt his pride terribly.

Also, the truth he long believed in was denied by my sword.

He would have felt like his world has collapsed.

Uncle was certainly a high-ranking knight, but he doesn’t have a soul to match it.

He reached that level through hard work and practice, not by pure soul and talent.

It would be hard for him to bear.

I have no resentment against him.

However, the queen who didn’t really understand what I did to his brother wouldn’t believe me when I say I don’t hate him.

“Be aware that your early release is also the result of your Uncle speaking with your father.”

She told me that Uncle had reported to the king that I was rapidly developing and seemed to be more mature.

“He placed himself in a tough position so the king could allow you to go out and visit that bad social club. He made a guarantee under his name and look at what happened that day.”

This was a story I hadn’t thought of, so I was a little embarrassed.

I didn’t expect that my sleazy Uncle would have persuaded the king from behind the scenes to lift my probation earlier than expected.

It must have been quite unpleasant that his nephew stirred trouble as soon as he was released.

It looks like he has done much for me.

“Although your Uncle is the highest-ranking military officer, the king would not give him an easy pass for what happened between you. There will be considerable difficulties in the future, which is not good for him, you, and even me.”

At first, she was just telling me not to resent Uncle; now she’s telling me to be sorry.

However, as I listened to her stories, it wasn’t contrary to my opinion, so I nodded.

“You seem to understand. Don’t speak anymore.”

After eating, I lay back down in bed and closed my eyes.

I thought if I closed my eyes, the queen would leave, but unfortunately, she seemed to be really planning to stay with me the whole day.

We were silent for a while, then she spoke again.

“As I told you before, we will be making an important decision at the banquet.”

The topic was very harsh for me.

The queen's voice was soft but also strict at the same time.

Her tone seems to warn me not to respond, as she would not accept any criticism or argument.

"There are young girls whom we have been paying attention to. One of them will be chosen as your partner."

* * *

The queen did stay with me for the whole day.

Afterward, I still couldn't rest.

It is because the queen sent another guest after her.

"I hate it. I absolutely hate it."

I was obviously disgusted and furious, but the elderly scholar that was sent by the queen didn't budge.

"Your Highness is now seventeen. Even if we start now, it feels like it's too late."

"No. Why do I need to study?"

"If we cannot learn, there is no difference between humans and beasts."

"Did you just say I was a beast?"

"It is that those who have not learned are like that. Your Highness has started his path to learning. To begin is to be halfway done. So, Your Highness has no cause to be embarrassed."

"I didn't start. I don't want to start. And don't play with words."

At my words, the old scholar closed the massive book he brought.

Then, he looked at me with deeply wrinkled eyes.

"There are things that we must do even if we hate them. Studying is one of them."

“It’s not because I don’t like to do it.”

“If so, what is the reason?”

I responded with anxiety.

“Because I have no need to learn.”

“Why is that?”

“I know as much as I need.”

The old scholar started chuckling.

“I devoted myself to learning for 60 years. However, I am still not confident, I know as much as I need. But how does the younger Highness say that?”

Still laughing, the scholar made a suggestion.

“Let’s talk about a few topics. If you can prove the knowledge you are confident in, I won’t come anymore.”

Of course, I accepted his offer.

CHAPTER 23
EVERYONE IS NOT THE SAME AS A FOOL (2)

What were all the scholars doing when the knights and soldiers shed blood and rolled the mud. The dreamers who couldn't practice their theories were simply good for sharing useless discourse from the safe side.

They never had to stand in front. They were just sharing spit.

That was how I thought scholars were.

So, when the elderly scholar came to me and told me that he is going to teach me, I laughed.

I have no desire to learn dead knowledge that didn't reflect reality.

No, I even wondered if I have anything I need to learn at this point.

Not everyone who handled my hilt was an ignorant swordsman. Some were families learned in both swordsmanship and scholarship. And over the centuries I spent with them, I have acquired their knowledge.

So, there was no further reason to learn useless things, I thought.

But.

The scholar in front of me wasn't a dreamer who had his head in the clouds.

His knowledge was realistic, practical, and extremely efficient.

I realized it when I started talking to him.

"Yes! People should always watch their backs. No one knows when a traitorous sword or a poisoned drink would come."

"That's a radical way to put it, but that's correct. The Iron Blood Monarch Theory also

speaks of the necessity of the monarch to be wary of the wickedness of the gods. In addition, it states that the monarch should not give out excessive power to someone, even if they trust them."

"That makes sense. Too much power corrupts."

I was thrilled by the scholar's words.

Time and again, royals were careless because they were surrounded by people who worshipped them. They have been warned of man's vicious qualities, but they did not listen and had to pay a harsh price.

Even I could be betrayed by people I trust.

Just thinking about it made my heart feel upset.

"In the Iron Blood Monarch Theory, the relationship between the royals and the military was considered as a kind of a contract or transaction like any other. To protect the kingdom, the royals provide the military economic and social power, while the military seeks to protect the political stability of the monarchs."

"Right. The basics to maintain a relationship is to give and receive. Isn't it natural to follow the hand that feeds you?"

To me, the practical and rational theory of governance the scholar talked about moistened my mind like rain to a drought.

"Then, Your Highness, I think that's enough for today. We will continue talking tomorrow."

"Uh. Yes, yes. I will wait."

The elderly scholar smiled gently, then left the room.

I kept contemplating about the Iron Blood Monarch Theory as I listened to his sluggish footsteps.

Then, I realized something.

"Huh?"

When I came to my senses, I realized I implicitly agreed to continue my studies with the scholar.

I unconsciously agreed to meet him again.

As I recalled the scholar's gentle smile after he told me that he'd see me tomorrow, I felt like I have been slapped.

This was definitely what I wanted to happen.

"That wasn't a smile, that was a smirk!"

I laughed at my own foolishness.

* * *

After leaving the First Prince, the old scholar went straight to the queen.

The queen greeted him as if she had been waiting.

"Sir Nicolo…"

"The rumors about His Highness were half right and half wrong."

The elderly scholar started reporting the news that the queen was curious about.

"His words and actions were like the rumors. However, he had an extraordinary wit and insight that were different from the rumors."

"Ah, you don't have to say good things about him. I know that child is fine physically, but his wit is good for nothing but cunning tricks that are used to fool other people."

The queen expressed concern about Sir Nicolo's feelings if he had been offended by the prince's harsh remarks.

"No, it was a great time for me, too. I didn't know when was the last I enjoyed talking to someone."

Again, the queen seemed to think that the scholar was sugarcoating.

Sir Nicolo then told her, “I swear I am not someone who calls black things white.”

“But I know my child. That kid is by no means the thoughtful kind.”

“If the queen thought so…” the elderly man’s eyes deepened, “then he must have made you see it that way.”

“Are you saying the kid had hidden his knowledge all this time? Why would he do it?”

Sir Nicolo shook his head at the queen’s question.

“To know someone’s thoughts, we have to discuss a hundred times; to know his character, a thousand times will not be enough. I could not guess what His Highness is thinking with just one meeting.”

He continued to speak with a shy attitude.

“It was just a glimpse into His Highness deep thoughts and insights.”

The queen’s eyes widened. She didn’t expect that the scholar would assess her child so generously.

What kind of person is the elderly scholar?

When he was young, he was praised as a genius, and when he got older, he was praised as a wise man.

Although the thoughts contained in his book, the Iron Blood Monarchy, which he wrote in his later years, were considered too radical, and his reputation has now fallen to the ground, no one could deny his wisdom.

If such a wise man praised his son, it must have been true.

Sir Nicolo then asked the queen with his eyes bright.

“I dare to ask the queen… may I convey to His Highness the enlightenment of this old man who says that the world is frivolous and wicked?”

“Why do you humble yourself? Everyone I know refers to you as a wise man.”

“They refer to me as a ‘lowly wise man.’ I’ve grown old, but I’m not completely deaf, so I know how the world calls me.”

The queen did not deny it.

The elderly scholar degraded the relationship of the royals and the military to a simple trade of business and earned the resentment of the nobles.

She had a hard time trying to look for a teacher to her son, whom no one wanted to teach.

At the same time, no one wanted to be Sir Nicolo Marchiadel’s disciple.

A rude and stupid student who all the teachers wanted to avoid, and a teacher who didn’t have a student because he said the world is wicked.

What could be a more exquisite combination?

“If you are able to teach him, you will be able to restore your reputation. Do whatever you want with him.”

“I have found the joy of old age, and I am pleased to be in the grace of the queen.”

Thus, Nicolo

Thus, Sir Nicolo Marchiadel professed in front of the queen that he would become the First Prince’s teacher.

Of course, Prince Adrian did not know about this conversation concerning him.

He was in his room, kicking himself because he had been outsmarted by an old man.

* * *

When the elderly scholar left me, I began feeling extremely bored.

The aftereffects of Muhun-si has not completely worn off yet, so I had to avoid training.

I have to wait at least until my mana heart has filled itself.

I just wandered around the room with nothing to do.

Immediately after waking up, I devoted myself to scraping mana, struggling to recover my lost power.

But whenever I take a break, my mind was restless.

“More powerful! Stronger!”

I trained Adelia, who is doing well.

“Why are the court knights not training?”

I also condemned Carls and court knights who were also doing well at their jobs.

However, the time does not pass quickly as I wandered aimlessly like that.

Then, Uncle came.

It had only been a few days, but he seemed to have a lot more wrinkles.

His eyes were dull, and his hair, which was always well-kept, was now disheveled in places.

Someone would think that Uncle had lost his will.

I could see right away that he couldn’t overcome the truth I planted in him.

When Uncle opened his mouth, all that came out was an apology.

“I’m sorry…”

It was really surprising.

“I broke the promise I made myself and ended up hurting you a lot. I have nothing to say.”

That was not true. The reason I was forced to recuperate for days was not because of his Aura Blade, but for forcibly using a <Myth> level poem.

“Well…”

I thought about the queen’s words. Uncle had secretly been my guarantor for my probationary release, and that made me indebted to him.

I felt a little torn. I got revenge and won the bet. Perhaps, that is why I felt a little more relaxed towards Uncle.

He continued speaking useless words.

“Say what you want. If you ask for my arm, I’ll give it; if you ask for my eye, I’ll give it.”

“What would I use those for? Tsu.”

I clicked my tongue at his words.

In the old days, to be called a sword master is no big deal.

The souls of the knights in this era were too low compared to the past ones.

Instead of breaking their limits and growing further, they chose to stagnate in sharpening and cultivating their existing skills.

If I leave Uncle like this, in all likelihood, he would be suffering for quite a while.

“Okay. I have decided what I want to wish for.”

At my words, Uncle looked eager and expectant.

If I told him to give out an arm, he looked like he was ready to cut it off.

Of course, I wasn’t interested in his furry arms.

“Uncle. I want to go outside.”

He looked confused.

“Why not? You can go out of this room even without me.”

I shook my head.

“No. Outside.”

CHAPTER 24
EVERYONE IS NOT THE SAME AS A FOOL (3)

“No. Outside.”

Only then did Uncle’s expression hardened, as if he had just realized what I was saying.

“A little farther away,” I added.

His face became worried.

“How far are you talking about?”

He had no choice but to accept my request.

“But we have to set some conditions because of what happened the last time,” he said.

He outlined the conditions one by one.

It must be within the schedule of the upcoming royal banquet.

The place should be one where the influence of the royal family is strong.

In the unlikely event of an unfavorable situation, we must return immediately.

“It’s difficult but okay.”

Uncle’s face remained uneasy even if I had accepted the conditions.

However, he could not violate his words once again. He had to fulfill my wish.

“It will take some time to schedule it,” he warned.

There are many things that need to be prepared when a member of a royal family visits a place. Political problems must not arise. In addition, it would be difficult to ask the king for permission again after what happened the last time.

Uncle turned away.

“Uncle. You don’t have to do this.”

I didn’t mean that. He knew.

“I’ll tell you as soon as the schedule comes out.”

He left without speaking further.

I felt gazes on my back. When I turned around, Carls and the court knights were all looking strangely at me.

“Why, what?”

“That’s a little surprising,” Carls said.

“What did you expect?”

“I expected Your Highness would ask for something great. It was an opportunity that rarely comes.”

The court knights nodded their agreement.

“You thought I was going to get rid of him, and it’s weird because I didn’t?”

“No, not that, Your Highness. I just thought you would make more demands. Revenge.”

“I did. It was an unreasonable demand.”

Someone who had failed once, asking for another guarantee.

His head must hurt right now, thinking about what excuse to tell the king.

In any case, if I get into another accident, he would pay the price.

It was not a light request as it sounded.

Of course, considering his grave error, I could have asked for more.

He was even offering to cut off his arm.

“Still… he looks salty being commanded by a little man.”

Carls laughed softly at my words. The court knights also smiled.

But their smiles were strange.

Their smile was something I would do if I saw someone covered in poo and urine.

I was annoyed.

“Hey! How do I look to you?”

However, the smiles on their lips did not disappear.

* * *

The elderly scholar returned.

I hated to study because most teaching methods were not great.

However, the scholar picked up where we left of yesterday and conducted the class through discourse.

It was the same as the day before.

Theories that I could sympathize with are unfolded. I pledged that I would not be smitten like the day before, but I soon fell into the deep discourse without noticing the passing of the time.

It was exactly the same as the day before.

“Then, Your Highness. We’ll share the rest of the story tomorrow.”

“Maybe we will, maybe not.” I deliberately replied.

“And, I brought a book that you can read when you’re free.”

“The Iron Blood Monarch Theory?”

“Everything we were discussing is contained in it.”

“Well, even if I have nothing to do, I don’t think I will read it.”

I acted increasingly aggressive towards the elderly scholar. However, he just kept smiling, as if accepting the complaints of a young grandson.

“Huh, but what is your name?”

“I am Nicolo Marchiadel. It’s enough if you just call me Nicolo.”

“Nicolo Marchiadel…… Good. From now on, I will call you Nicolo.”

“Since we exchanged names, it can be said that the relationship has progressed further. So tomorrow, let’s talk deeper.”

Something passed through my flow of consciousness.

Even if he pretended not to be, the scholar in front of me was anxious and did not have anyone else to speak with.

Is he lonely? Hmmm.

I turned to the book he left behind.

It was too heavy and too thick for an old man to carry.

On its cover, the words’ Iron Blood Monarchy’ was written in plain typeface.

“Uh?”

There was a familiar name under the title.

But the name written under it was familiar.

「Nicolo Marchiadel」

It was ridiculous.

So, he was teaching me his own theory and making me read his own book?

What a shameless man.

Still, he was sincere enough to carry this heavy thing to me, so let's give it a try.

I opened the book. Slowly, I turned the pages.

Slowly, but without stopping.

Then, I found myself in the last chapter without noticing the time.

"Hmm."

The relations between the military and the nobles were dealt with like the contracts in the market.

Loyalty to the nobles was regarded as maintaining social and economic stability.

How can a monarch get the most attractive contract, and how to keep it going without breaking the contract?

That was the main content of the book.

"I think the nobles and the royals would hate this."

But not me. I liked the book.

"It's true. This is what happens in reality."

I greatly sympathized with his thoughts.

Unfortunately, I was not a monarch yet.

The only people I have were Adelia and Arwen.

I haven't even seen the latter since she swore her allegiance.

Right now, I only have Adelia.

"Your Highness."

Just in time, Adelia appeared. She had <Servility>, and the theories on the book won't apply to her.

So, all I have were an absent knight and a slave knight. This book is useless to me.

"Adelia, what do you want from me?"

"Your Highness, a letter came for you."

She handed me a letter. It was sent by my first knight, who is working hard with the Templar Knights.

"I have achieved a small achievement recently. I think I will be able to see you sooner. I hope you will be safe until that day."

The sentences were plain.

Her handwriting seemed to be overly conscious of the reader's eyes.

Even in her handwriting, she wanted to appear as a knight rather than a woman.

"Achievement…"

Maybe by now, she has become a double chain knight. The only reason she would decide to come to me is if she reached the status of a real knight. That could only be why she said the day she would return is imminent.

"It would be perfect. I could practice with her before my match with the Third Prince."

My first bet with Uncle to compete with a double chain knight was meaningless now.

From the very beginning, it didn't really suit my taste, but I took it as a small motivation while training.

Since it meant nothing for me to win against a double-chain knight, shouldn't I just cancel it?

No. I don't intend to. I can't lose.

I thought about the Third Prince's face. His gentle words and smiles, but the intention

of stepping on me were in his head.

“If I’m going to do it, I should do it right.”

“Your Highness?”

Adelia was confused by my self-talk.

“Oh, no. How was your training today?”

I couldn’t supervise her training because I was with the elderly scholar.

“I’m just trying to live up to the expectations of Your Highness.”

“Okay. I look forward to it.”

I was really looking forward to it.

Her growth after she gave me the [Poetry of Subjugation] will also be my growth.

At the same time, I was worried.

I didn’t know when the [Butcher] and [War Maniac] traits would manifest.

“Adelia, before you go…”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“If you start getting an impulse that is difficult to bear, be sure to tell me.”

I asked her because I didn’t know what could happen.

Even if I had instilled with her several times that I was her master, I was still not sure what could happen.

* * *

A few days have passed.

My mind and body recovered to the point that I felt that my injured spirit had been

stabilized to some extent.

And when another day passed again, I felt mana starting to build up in my empty heart.

I stopped doing what I was doing and started scraping mana straight away.

My heart drank up mana as if dry cotton was soaking up water.

It's taking longer than expected. It seemed that my mana heart can take up more mana now.

Lately, I realized that it was not just injuries that the [Poem of the Dragon Slayer] left behind.

"I tried a miracle that I could not handle, and I saw some of that great will."

『The influence was reflected in the body.』

『The mana heart has been expanded.』

『With the expanded mana hearts, the constitution of the body has changed considerably.』

『The body can withstand more mana.』

The mana heart has finally filled to the brim, and a message came into my ears.

『You have reached the level of Sword Expert.』

I leveled up.

It didn't end there.

"The state of connection with the source has improved somewhat."

"Some of the restraints of the restored power have been released."

『Power, [Third Eye] has improved considerably.』

『Power, [Third Ear] has improved considerably.』

A new power was in my body.

CHAPTER 25
THE SWORD MEETS THE SWORD (1)

“The schedule has been set.”

After five days, Uncle came back with good news.

“We plan to go through the royal road for two days, then stopover for three days at Count Ellen’s, before going to the Templar Castle two days further on. All in all, it would take about twenty days from departure to return.”

I wondered if we’d be able to take a week away, but it was longer than was expected. It was a good surprise.

Besides, I also liked that we’re stopping by the Templar Castle.

I heard that the Templar Knights are one of the best in the kingdom.

At this moment, I was excited to gauge the level of the most popular knights of this era.

I would also get to see Arwen’s growth in person.

The letter she sent me stating her ‘achievement’ made me excited.

Uncle continued to inform me of various matters, such as the number of attendants that would come with us, but I was not interested in that.

“You have done a good job,” I told him. “I don’t need those details, just tell me more about Count Ellen.”

At my words, Uncle started firing off information about Count Ellen.

“They have an iron mine in the premises that supplies high-quality iron, and a guild that smiths it. More than half of the armaments delivered to the royal family are from Count Ellen.”

“Hoh, that’s appealing.”

When I reached the level of sword expert some time ago, I visited the arsenal of the royal palace.

Since I am now a sword expert, I could not keep using a wooden sword all the time.

However, I could not even check the swords in the palace.

The court knights informed me that the king forbade me to enter the arsenal, or to touch any sword.

It was unfair, but I could not argue with the king.

It was because the First Prince, whose body I took, hurt himself with a stolen sword.

Thanks to that, I earned a human body, but I earned the king’s anger as well.

Eventually, I had to turn away from the arsenal’s entrance without even having a step inside.

A foreign city known for high-quality armaments would not have a rule limiting the use of swords.

The king’s instruction about me was limited to the warehouses of the royal palace, and as such, I should be able to obtain weapons outside the palace.

“You could not have chosen a more perfect destination,” I smiled at Uncle.

“If you have another accident this time, you and I will suffer in many ways, so…”

“Don’t worry.”

Uncle was still uneasy.

“How could I not worry?”

* * *

It was the day of departure.

I got up early and prepared. I am excited about the thought of leaving the palace.

But that feeling didn't last very long.

I wanted to leave right away, but there were more things to go through than I originally thought.

First, I have to inform the king and queen about my departure.

The king appeared disinterested and even waved his hand a few times to shoo me away as if I was annoying.

The queen, however…

She nagged endlessly as if it was the last time she would be seeing me, and her overwhelming nagging splashed cold water on my excitement.

"Finally, I ask you to…"

How many times would she say 'finally'?

"So be careful. Come back right away if something happens. I don't know what's going on in your Uncle's mind."

"Yes, yes."

It seemed never-ending, but *finally,* it was time to leave.

"Ah, I'm so tired," I whined to myself.

I haven't taken a step outside the palace yet, but I was already feeling tired.

I found Uncle and the attendants waiting for me at the entrance of the palace. I went inside the carriage that I once rode.

"It's late, so let's go right away."

Uncle nodded. "I will close the windows," he said and closed the shutters.

Again, I am locked inside the boring carriage.

Adelia was dressed in a simpler outfit than usual. I tried to talk to her to soothe my boredom, but the only answers that came back were the predictable “Yes, Your Highness,” and “I’m sorry, Your Highness.”

Ah, it’s not fun.

Eventually, I gave up talking and lay down.

* * *

On the first day, I stayed in the carriage.

However, it didn’t feel good to be buried inside it and be carried like cargo. I complained to Uncle, and he gave me a horse to ride.

“But I don’t know how to ride a horse?”

I mean it.

How would I have learned to ride a horse when I’ve lived as a sword all my life?

Uncle sighed as if he found it ridiculous, then called a horseman to teach me how to ride.

From then on, I was on horseback for the rest of the journey.

It wasn’t easy. It was easy enough to stay on its back while it was walking, but it was a different story when it ran.

It wasn’t bad, though.

Feeling the breeze against my face made me feel excited.

Besides, what is with this majestic landscape surrounding me?

I traveled with excitement as I captured the world full of life and vitality, not the hazy world I saw as a sword.

I was so immersed in the fun of riding a horse that I didn’t notice we have reached the border of Count Ellen.

“We’re a day late,” Uncle looked upset.

“Isn’t this an excursion? Didn’t we want to get some fresh air? So, what if we’re late?”

Uncle laughed a dry laugh, then turned his head at the cloud of dust that appeared in the distance.

“Must be Count Ellen’s cavalry.”

Soon, a group of horsemen stopped in front of us.

Chuck-!

The horsemen jumped off and knelt on one knee.

“Ellen’s eldest son Torrance meets His Highness Adrian Leonberger! It’s an honor to meet you!”

An unusually large young man greeted me. I thought he was part of the cavalry, but it turns out he was the Count’s successor.

After I muttered a rough response, Torrance explained that he had been searching the premises because we did not arrive on the expected day. He mentioned that the Count’s troops were also searching the area.

“The carriage’s wheel broke and caused a delay,” Uncle said. “I sent a message to your father; he didn’t get it?”

“Ah, I have been looking around since yesterday, so I do not know any news from the castle. It seems like the messenger’s and our paths didn’t cross.”

Anyway, he said it was fortunate that we have arrived safely.

We followed Torrance Ellen. As time passed, I saw a city in the distance. It looked to be a pretty bustling city even from afar.

At the entrance, there was a crowd of welcoming people. Among them was Count Ellen, who was as big as his son.

“You don’t know how honored we were for your visit, Your Highness. Edgar from Ellen

greets you."

"Thank you for your hospitality."

After the greetings were over, we were guided into the Count's mansion.

The mansion's interior was all about weaponry.

Glittering swords hung on the wall; various types of armor were displayed on either side of the halls.

As we walked past them, the Count explained the origin of the sword or armor, in a proud tone.

I listened to his words in a daze.

He said they have a guild of smiths, and that more than half of the armaments supplied to the royal family were from their smithy. I already learned that from Uncle, so I wanted to know more.

However, the armaments lined up everywhere I looked were disappointing.

Their gorgeous designs look good to the eye, but they seemed to only be good for decorations, not actual combat. People won't be using these things in real life.

It seemed that it was difficult to find what I was looking for in Count Ellen's castle.

* * *

As expected, Count Ellen gave me swords and armor on my first day.

However, it wasn't different from the items that hung on the hallways. They were best used as ornaments.

At this point, I was wondering if Count Ellen was treating me as a fool, but looking at his sincere expressions, I doubted it.

Perhaps, the Count seemed to think that the stuff he had was really good.

Maybe, the aesthetics appealed to him more than practicality.

Other than that, there was no way he could proudly show off such weapons that could not be used in real-life.

“Did you say you want to take a tour of the smithy?”

“Yes. Why? Is it too difficult?”

At my words, the Count looked embarrassed.

“The smithy was not a suitable place for noble people like Your Highness to visit.”

The heat from the furnace, the noise of the iron getting pounded, bla bla bla. The Count had repeatedly tried to persuade me to visit somewhere else. There were more places to see than the smithy.

Of course, no matter what he said, I had no intention of bending my will.

“If you insist, Your Highness…”

The Count called his eldest son.

“Torrance knows the smithy and the guild better than me, so he would be a good guide.”

I didn’t care who guided me, so I went to the guild with Torrance.

“All the smiths were hard-tempered and stubborn,” he warned me, as we walked.

“When the work was in full swing, they often pretend not to notice even the Count, and the words they spoke were as cold and crude as the iron they are dealing with.”

He didn’t have to warn me. I had a deeper understanding of smithies than Torrance.

As we talked for a while, the guild’s building came into view.

It was a huge workshop.

“Woo.” I was filled with anticipation.

“The furnace is too hot. If you can’t stand it, please tell me.”

I did not answer Torrance.

It wasn't because of the heat of the furnace.

When we opened the door… This smell. This noise.

My mind flew.

Clang-!

Clang-!

Clang-!

I fell in love with the sound of iron being pounded.

"Your Highness?"

I was heading into the middle of a workplace full of heat.

Clang-!

Clang-!

The sound of iron was everywhere. Among them, there was a particularly unique sound.

I instinctively followed it.

Clang-!

Clang-!

Clang-!

When I came to my senses, I was standing in front of an old man.

CHAPTER 26
THE SWORD MEETS THE SWORD (2)

I watched the old man's back.

Clang-!

The old man raised the hammer and struck again.

Clang-!

There is no difference in strength. There was no difference in the height of his swing.

Clang-!

The perfect sound was constantly repeated.

Again, I felt my heartbeat quicken. A faint rush of blood to my head.

Clang-!

My first memories and reality perfectly overlapped.

Clang-!

An unknown sensation filled me, then quickly disappeared. It happened before I even realized it.

I attempted to recall that sensation, but the sound of hammering that continued uninterruptedly in the background broke my focus.

I felt as if I lost something.

I watched the old man. He had stopped hammering. He brought the iron into the furnace, held it there for a few moments, then brought it back.

Again, he raised his hammer against the heated iron.

Clang-!

A flaming blade.

Suddenly, a white hand appeared in my vision.

Something cold touched my forehead.

It was as if I was woken up from a dream.

“Ah…”

Until that moment, I was unaware of anything else around me.

Only the old man’s hammering mattered.

Now, I noticed other sounds. The other smiths beating heated iron. The sound of the bellows hissing. The sound of the flames clamoring.

“Your Highness, you’re sweating too much.”

I heard Amelia’s voice. She held a wet handkerchief against my forehead.

Only then did I look around.

The other smiths, who were busy with their own hammers, stopped and bowed. Their apprentices who were stepping on the bellows knelt.

A strong middle-aged man wandered around the workshop and forced the smiths to stop working.

Then, he ran and fell at my feet.

“The lowly things greet the Prince.”

He had a different aura than other craftsmen in different fields. He didn’t have the clumsiness peculiar to a craftsman, only a sense of strength and efficiency.

“Your Highness,” Torrance introduced him, “He is Saxony, who is in charge of the guild.”

“Right.” I said briefly, then turned my head again to the old man.

“What are you doing?” I heard Saxony yell out. “Stop what you’re doing and pay your respects! Stop!”

“Stop,” I told him, shutting him down.

“Yes, Your Highness?” He looked confused as if he was trying to figure out my intentions.

He wiped his mouth. Then, he rubbed his hand on his jacket as he looked around.

The faces of the smiths around him were full of dissatisfaction. They could not protest, however, but their displeasure at having to stop their work was plain.

“Why did you stop them?” I asked him.

“Y-your Highness?” Saxony’s eyes widened.

I turned and spoke to the smiths around me.

“It will cool down.”

At my words, the smiths looked confused.

“Keep feeding the flames in the furnace!”

The smiths suddenly realized what I was saying and immediately jumped into action.

“What are you doing? Are you not stepping on the bellows?”

“Start moving! Feed the flame!”

The smiths started yelling at their apprentices.

The familiar sound started reverberating in all directions.

The bellows hissing, the sound of hammering.

They did not contain the perfection of the old man's swing, but the overflowing vitality in the workshop made me satisfied.

* * *

I watched the old man for a long time. He didn't stop working until the end, never even sparing a second to look at me.

Carls and other court knights wanted to make him kneel down, but I stopped them.

Time passed. The sun was almost setting.

"Let's stop for today," I announced.

Unfortunately, I had to stop watching him. I want to keep listening and watching to the old man, but I could not stand watching the heavily armored court knights wilting in the heat of the furnace any longer.

As we stepped out of the workshop, Carls face was red, and the court knights were breathing heavily.

They didn't say it, but the visit was obviously a painful experience for them.

"He has been making and dissolving swords for half a year. He works on them with full concentration like that, but once he finishes, he melts the sword immediately," Torrance explained.

"Are the finished products failures?" I asked him.

Torrance shook his head.

"That is what's odd, Your Highness. The King even gave him the title of "Master Swordsmith". All his works were perfect. Even the ones he melts off were masterpieces."

"But why would he melt a masterpiece?"

Torrance shrugged and sighed, saying he doesn't know.

"He has been working hard on that one for a month. He hardly sleeps. As he is not young anymore, I am not alone in worrying whether he would get to finish that sword."

* * *

I visited the old man again the next day.

The old man was always the same. His movement, his posture… the only thing that changed was that the iron he was pounding was now almost like a finished blade.

I stayed in the workshop from sunrise to sunset, peacefully listening to the sound of the old man's hammer.

I didn't feel the odd sensation that fleeted through me on the first day. However, I didn't get tired of the sound of the man's hammer.

When I came back after spending a day in the workshop, Count Ellen was always waiting for me back at the mansion.

Having dinner, sharing boring conversations.

If there wasn't for the guild, I would have left the Count's place immediately.

"Are you interested in metallurgy?"

Uncle came into my room one night to ask me.

He heard that I was staying in the smithy all day.

"It's not that I am interested, rather, I feel at peace when I am in the smithy."

Uncle tilted his head as if he could not understand what I was saying.

He said something else.

"We've stayed here for almost three days. We'll leave for the Templar Castle soon, so if you have another place you want to visit here, do it tomorrow."

"I will. You're so busy that I hardly see you."

"There is something that His Majesty asked me to do. It will be finished in a day or two, so you have nothing to worry about…"

Uncle looked tired. It seems that the King did not give him permission without asking for something in return.

* * *

It was the day before we were scheduled to leave Count Ellen.

As always, I headed to the guild's workshop.

"Oh, you're here again."

Saxony saw me and gave me a cringy greeting. I shook his hand roughly and went straight to the old man.

The old man greeted me with his back, as always.

Clang-!

Clang-!

I listened to the sound of his hammer as I looked at the old man more closely.

Within a few days, he was noticeably thinner. He seemed to have reached the limit of his physical strength. As Torrance said, it was likely that he would fall before finishing this sword.

Surprisingly, the sound of his hammering remained the same.

"I wanted to see it before we left," I said loudly at his back.

The old man didn't answer. He just adjusted his posture and continued hammering.

I felt the workshop earlier than usual. As today is the last day of my stay at Count Ellen, I had something else to do.

Of course, it was to attend a useless farewell party prepared by Count Ellen.

"I have to go." I told the old man.

I left the workshop and looked back in regret several times.

* * *

Finally, he's going.

Torrance Allen sighed with relief.

How anxious he was when he heard that the First Prince, infamous for being an idiot, is coming to visit them. It was terrifying to think of what evil he may do in their estate.

Just as expected, there was trouble from the first day.

The Prince arrived one day later than the date they were informed of.

He cursed the Prince under his breath as he led the cavalry to search for them in the plains.

Still, he was very happy when he met them. It was absolutely fortunate that a member of a royal family didn't die somewhere in their territory.

The First Prince was rumored to be a fat pig with a nasty attitude.

However, the First Prince he met was completely different from the rumors.

He wasn't a fat pig, and he wasn't a nasty idiot.

The Prince was a handsome man with a physique of someone who had been training.

His words and actions were sometimes rough, but by no means nasty or idiotic.

Of course, he couldn't let his guard down even after the good first impression.

He waited for the Prince to reveal his true colors.

In fact, at the welcome dinner, the Prince did not say the greetings he should express to the host.

Even if that was insulting, his father presented him with valuable weapons. It was a luxurious gift to prevent the Prince from thinking of something nasty to do in their mansion.

So, the first day passed safely.

The next day, the Prince said he wanted to tour the guild's workshop. His father, who was familiar with the sassy character of the smiths, didn't want to accompany him, expecting that trouble would be brewed in that visit.

But the Prince could not be stopped!

Eventually, Torrance had to claim responsibility and guide him.

As they walked to the workshop, he warned him about the attitude of the smiths, but the Prince didn't seem to be listening.

Torrance was filled with anxiety.

As expected, the smiths didn't even put their tools down. It was only after Saxony yelled out and made a riot that they reluctantly expressed courtesy.

Fortunately, the Prince seemed to take that well.

However, as always, everything in the world doesn't work out as he would have liked.

The old master didn't even want to look at the Prince.

Surprisingly, the Prince wasn't angry with that treatment. Rather, he even stopped Saxony, and his court knights from stopping the old man's work.

He even urged the smiths and the apprentices to resume their work immediately.

"Keep feeding the flames in the furnace!"

It was then that Torrance realized that the Prince was not the bad seed that everyone thought him to be.

He was convinced day after day, as he watched the Prince in the workshop. He never interfered or ruined the smiths' work.

He seemed to be in deep regret that he was leaving without seeing the master complete his sword. It was such a strong emotion that even the people watching him felt his sadness.

So, when he learned that the master was almost finished, Torrance ran to the Prince to inform him.

Surely, the sword would be melted again this time, so he hoped that the Prince would see it before it the inevitable happened.

However, he was wrong.

When he returned to the workshop with the Prince, the master had attached a handle to the blade he had been working on.

Whoa.

As Torrance stared at the finished sword, he understood why all the other swords that seemed fine were melted off.

“I dedicate this sword to Your Highness.”

The master offered the handle to the Prince.

A great sword, created by an inspired soul who worked on it tirelessly for a month.

He offered it to the Prince, whom he hadn’t said a word to in the past few days.

CHAPTER 27
THE SWORD MEETS THE SWORD (3)

One day, I felt deep regret when I woke up.

The craftsman's pride was gone. All that was left was disillusionment with myself.

It was a feeling that I felt for the first time in my life.

As always, I stood in front of the furnace. I placed a heated iron on the anvil and hammered it.

It was the work that I have repeated countless times before.

However, this time, I felt like he was forging his own heart and life, not a sword.

Soon, the blade was completed.

However, I was not satisfied with it. It was full of impurities, like my heart.

They made a lot of fuss around the sword, saying that it was another luxury product.

However, in my eyes, it was full of impurities.

Without hesitation, I threw it back to the furnace and watched it melt.

Saxony, the head of the workshop, was upset, but I didn't care.

I took the hammer again and began refining and forging another sword.

I was unsatisfied with it. It felt like my inspiration has dried up.

Again, I threw it back to the furnace and watched it melt.

Then, I started working on another one. And another.

Whenever I discarded an imperfect sword, the remorse and self-doubt in my head faded little by little. I became more excited about the work.

Soon, all the regrets in my heart were gone.

It was replaced with a craftsman's longing.

Before I die, I want to make even a single proper sword.

However, there seemed to be not enough time left.

My weakened body would not be able to lift the hammer soon.

So, I have to hurry.

I picked up a fresh batch of iron. As I held it, a song passed through my mind.

[Heat like the sun rising on the horizon; cool like the king's magenta coat.]

[Then, a sword will rise like the sun, and like a king, it will be born.]

The furnace was lit. When the iron turned red like the sun, I removed it from the flames.

And started hammering.

Clang-!

Clang-!

When the iron turned magenta, I dip it in precious whale oil and put it back into the furnace.

The process is repeated countless times.

A day, two days, a week, forty days have passed.

Normally, the sword would have taken shape at this point.

Strangely, it had not revealed itself yet.

Clang-!

Clang-!

The change was still insignificant.

I thought my energy was going to run out before I could see the end of my journey.

The thought that my last sword would remain unfinished fueled me more.

Then one day, the workshop became noisy.

It seems that a high-ranking noble has visited.

At that moment, a change took place with the iron.

As if it was taking shape on its own, it gradually began to take the shape of a sword.

My impatience disappeared; my heart started to relax.

I learned who it was that visited the workshop.

A prince. The First Prince of the kingdom visited them.

However, I could not stop working. I burned myself more and more.

I could almost see the end of the journey.

The iron took shape surprisingly quickly.

“I wanted to see it before we left.”

The Prince’s words pierced my ears.

Shortly thereafter, Saxony told me that the Prince would be leaving soon.

That day, I did not leave the anvil. I hammered without stopping for a break.

As a result, by the time dawn came, the sword was finally completed.

Then, I saw Count Ellen's eldest son, Torrance, appear with the Prince.

I didn't realize where the confidence came from. It was as if the sword took control of my mouth.

I found myself standing in front of the Prince, with the sword placed carefully on both my palms.

"I dedicate this sword to Your Highness."

* * *

"Does it have a name?" I asked the old man.

"What if we call it Twilight?"

"Is that twilight at dusk, or twilight at dawn?"

"It will be dusk for me, but dawn for you."

I laughed, then reached out to take the sword.

As I took the sword off his hands, it seemed like the old man's body was emptied.

He stumbled and fell to the ground.

I immediately reached out to catch him. I felt his light frame. He was so weak that he would have died on the spot.

I watched the light fading from his eyes.

"Tell Uncle," I turned to Carls.

"Your Highness?"

"Tell him I think we should spend the night here."

* * *

Count Balahard arrived after the Prince moved the old man to a secluded place, away

from the heat of the workshop.

“What is it? Why are you delaying our departure?”

“I received an unexpected gift, but there is no way to pay the price, so I am thinking of staying by his side.”

People were amazed at the thoughts of the Prince, and they were more surprised to see that Count Bale Balahard, famous across the kingdom, gave way to his nephew.

The night has come. The torches were lit.

Well-armed court knights surrounded the Prince, and Count Ellen’s troops protected them even further.

Count Allen rebuked Torrance at the side, away from other people’s eyes.

“I bet, even if we combine all the swords that the master has ever made, it will not reach the value of that single sword.”

“I know! I have eyes, too. But what could I do? He already offered it to the Prince.” Torrance was full of resentment. “How about doing this: let’s offer His Highness a sword suitable for his age, and get that sword back?”

Count Ellen frowned and looked toward the Prince.

The master’s work stood upright next to the Prince. It was a long sword, with an odd wave pattern throughout its blade. It looked quite precious.

“Unless he is an idiot, he wouldn’t exchange that sword…”

“We can’t offer him just a sword. Something that would be tempting to hold…”

Soon, some soldiers headed for the castle. When they returned to the Count and Torrance, they brought a large chest with them.

Torrance opened the chest and pulled out a gorgeous sword studded with red jewels.

“Your Highness. I believe that this sword would be better for a prince to use. This is a magic sword that I was going to offer you in exchange for…”

The Prince shook his hand and look at him with a gloomy face.

“Later.”

It was short, but the will contained in that response was too strong. Torrance had to turn back, embarrassed.

Soon, the old man opened his eyes.

The Prince and the old man had a long conversation. They laughed and chatted as if they knew each other for a long time.

It was a strange sight.

The noble First Prince hanging out with a filthy old blacksmith.

The guards who watched the scene felt a strange feeling.

Candles burn the brightest at the last moment. The old man’s death is not far away.

The conversation between the old man and the Prince paused.

The Prince leaned in and whispered to the old man.

A whisper that no one except the old man could hear.

Then, the old man turned pale with shock, as if he had seen a ghost.

“Oh my God! You!”

“Yes.”

“Huh, huh!”

The old man chuckled. At first, there was embarrassment in his face; then, there was wonder. Finally, there was hope.

“May this sword be great like you…”

“It will be so.”

The Prince smiled gently.

The old man's eyes closed. The smile on his mouth was more peaceful than any other smile he had in his life.

* * *

Originally, I just wanted to stay with the old man on his final moments, but when I learned that there was no special ceremony for his funeral, I stayed one more day to attend it.

"We have to hurry."

Uncle was impatient. It seems that he had something to do in the Templar Castle, just as he had an unknown mission in Count Ellen's.

However, I have to finish my own work at Count Ellen's before I go.

"Are you done?"

"Almost. Don't worry."

I beckoned Torrance, who finally came to bid his goodbye.

"Give it to me."

"Your Highness?"

"The magic sword."

At my words, Torrance's eyes widened. Then, he looked as if he was hiding a smile.

"You'll love it very much."

Torrance beckoned a soldier. It seemed that he had prepared for it in advance, and the gorgeous sword was brought to me in no time.

"It feels good," I said as I held it.

The magic sword would be quite useful to me.

The sword itself wasn't bad, and the energy felt from the jewel stuck in the middle of the hilt wasn't unusual.

It was at least a mid-level artifact.

Torrance's eyes were shifting as if gauging if I knew the true value of Twilight or not.

Of course, I knew it more than anyone else.

"Your Majesty, then…" he started to whisper.

"Thank you for the gift that I will receive along with the master's sword. It is proof that the Ellen family's loyalty towards the royal family is truly unique." I interrupted him.

His lips wriggled as if he wanted to say something. Then, his shoulders drooped as if he realized what just happened.

I turned around and started making my way towards the royal convoy.

Uncle, who watched the whole scene, clicked his tongue as we walked together.

* * *

We were delayed for a day before reaching Count Allen's castle and delayed two more days because of the old man's death.

So, we ran as if we were messengers of war towards the Templar Castle.

The knights and the cavalry were at maximum speed, the wagons and the infantry were to follow.

As a result, the trip to Templar Castle, which was estimated to be at two days, only took half a day.

"Wow!"

I exclaimed as the massive fortress came into view. Soon, its gate opened up, and a group of people poured out from within.

They were knights dressed in iron armor.

The Templar Knights ran towards us menacingly, only slowing down when they reached a certain distance from us.

As soon as we heard their greetings, we went straight to the castle.

“York Willowden greets His Highness, the Royal First Prince!”

Count York Willowden, Lord of Templar Castle, and head of the Templar Knights met us, with two hundred knights roaring behind him.

Excessively spirited hospitality.

Probably, if I was really an idiot, I would have been overwhelmed by their spirit and lied low for the whole visit.

Of course, I wasn’t that guy. I had no intention to leave this place quietly.

“Uncle, do what you have to do.”

He turned to me. I continued. “I have things to do here, as well.”

Uncle’s brows furrowed as if he wanted to know what I was planning.

There were hundreds of knights in front of us.

Among them, there was one that caught my eye.

Arwen Kirgayenne.

My first knight was among them.

We nodded at each other. At the same time, I could feel the blood of the Templar Knights around her boil slowly.

The outright jealousy that I feel in them made me happy.

“Today is going to be great,” I told Uncle.

CHAPTER 28
START NORMALLY, FINALLY BE EXTRAORDINARY (1)

The mood was volatile. The Templar Knights were outrightly hostile as if they would explode if a spark was thrown to them.

It was a mood too disrespectful to show a prince.

But I didn't find it odd at all.

Knights of the past were judges, poets, and adventurers. They walked the hard path to transcendence. They were absolutely free, and the only thing that could bind them was their own will.

But not the knights of the present.

They were not free, and they lived for the monarchs first rather than reaching self-completion and transcendence.

They have been educated to stiffen their necks and not to pay tribute to anyone but their masters. Because they were such people, their disrespectful attitude was to be expected.

They would not honor me, much less be loyal to me.

Their brief homage to the royal flag was just a formality.

If not for it, perhaps, they would have drawn their swords already.

I knew it; Uncle and the court knights knew it. There was no one here who could not feel that animosity.

I felt a fire burning my back.

“Huh?”

I looked back and found Adelia staring at me.

Her eyes were burning. It seemed that the Templar Knights’ attitude stimulated her evil side.

[Butcher]

[War Maniac]

“Adelia,” I soothed her, trying to calm her down.

Fortunately, it seems that the characteristic of [Servility], which I devoted to growing from the moment I trained her, was superior to those of her other characteristics.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

Her voice returned to normal. The fire in her eyes suddenly died down.

Whoo.

I sighed with relief and turned to Uncle.

“Then, see you later at dinner.”

Without taking his eyes of Count York Willowden, Uncle nodded.

It was permission to go inside the castle to my heart’s content.

I smiled and called out.

“Arwen.”

The beautiful woman stepped forward and knelt on one knee in front of me.

“I waited for the day to see Your Highness once more.”

Her words seemed to infuriate the knights further.

In fact, her voice seemed to be full of pride and self-esteem, as if she had achieved the state where she was worthy of being called my knight.

“I have also waited,” I told her.

I deliberately approached her and offered my hand to lift her.

She was puzzled by my kindness but took my hand nevertheless.

It must have looked very sweet to others.

The Templar Knights looked on eagerly, salivating like hungry predators.

Of course, I intended for that reaction.

“Then, let’s go to a quiet place and talk,” I said, loud enough for the Templar Knights to hear.

Their blood boiled again.

They were really simple and easy to manipulate.

* * *

“Your Highness?”

After walking for a while to find a quiet place, Arwen looked at me with a puzzled face.

I ignored her and turned around.

As expected, there were knights of the Templar Knights that followed us.

“Do you have anything to say to me?” I asked them.

At my words, some of the knights trembled. It seems that they didn’t expect that I would ask that brazenly.

“If you have anything to say, say it.”

There was no answer. That was good. They might not have anything to say, but I do.

“I would like to see the swords of the Templar Knights, the first in the kingdom.”

I stated my business directly. There was no more time to waste. We have been delayed in coming here.

“Who will show me the famous swordsmanship of the Templar Knights?” I yelled at them.

They exchanged glances, but no answer came back. I went on to promise that I would not use the Leonberger’s name and retaliate and that they would not take responsibility for whatever that happened.

Still, no one dared to step forward.

“Is there no one? The Templar Knights were weaker than I thought.”

I clicked my tongue and shook my head exaggeratedly.

“Is this how you represent your famous name? It’s a disgrace.”

Finally, one person stepped forward at my provocation.

“If you allow me, I would dare stand in front of Your Highness.”

He was a young man who seemed to be an apprentice.

“There is nothing that needs my permission. I was asking for it,” I assured him.

Then, I reached out, and Adelia handed me a sword.

It was Twilight, crafted by the master swordsmith.

“No, not this,” I told her.

I did not intend to make a simple sparring match turn into a bloodbath.

Adelia then gave me a wooden sword.

“I am Dale from the Denant family. I have not yet received a formal oath.”

Like me, Dale held a wooden sword in his hand.

As he glanced at Arwen while he spoke, I could see the ambition in his mind to break me and show off to her.

She seemed to be more than a colleague in his eyes.

“Then, I will start. Please be careful.”

He rushed in, with more force than was necessary.

“Tsu.”

I felt somewhat sorry for the apprentice knight.

The embarrassment waiting for him, right in front of the woman he admired…

“Huh!”

With a swing, Dale was thrown back. When he fell to the ground, his tongue was hanging out, and his eyes were white.

It ended up uglier than I thought. I felt even more sorry.

But in the first place, my business wasn’t for trainees like Dale.

“Next.”

As I clapped my hands, the crowd of knights buzzed. They glanced at each other once more; then, a large man stepped forward.

“This is Paul Rothheim. Third-year apprentice.”

He seemed proud talking about the number of years, so I had an idea that he had been training longer than Dale, who failed so badly.

But what does it all mean? The results would be the same anyway.

“Hiya!”

Paul was hit with the training sword on his crown and passed out in an instant.

"……is. Fourth-year apprentice. Take good care of me."

"……Fifth-year apprentice."

Men stepped out one after another, and each one had more years in training than the previous one. As if that would matter to me.

"Your Highness, this is Mueller Hard. 8th-year apprentice."

He was a man who looked more composed than the others. He seemed to be on a different level than the trainees who had come out so far.

It will be a little different this time.

Mueller actually blocked my sword to prove his skill.

He seemed to be at Arwen's previous level.

But that was all. I have defeated Arwen at that level.

He lasted five seconds before he rolled over the floor in pain.

As I glanced at Muller, who was writhing in pain, some of the knights caught my eyes.

They were some who looked at me with deep, longing looks. Official knights, not trainees. However, they seem to think that it was not at their level to compete with me.

Arrogant bastards.

"Are the Templar Knights only good for words? Is this the sword you are proud of?"

I blatantly provoked them. The official knights' brows crossed, but they still seemed unwilling to step forward.

I turned my head.

"Arwen."

She looked surprised that I have beaten an eight-year apprentice without much difficulty.

She was amazed by my growth, but quickly, she composed herself. She looked confident that she had grown as much as I did.

“When I leave this place, you return with me to the palace,” I told her.

“If that’s what Your Highness wants.”

The knights roared at her answer.

It was the reaction I was waiting for.

“Your Highness.”

I turned around in the direction of the deep voice. It was one of the guys who was staring at me intensely.

“I heard that Your Highness likes to bet.”

What?

“Why don’t we place a small bet to boost entertainment?”

His gaze turned to Arwen. Even if he didn’t say it, I knew exactly what he was trying to say.

“Impossible.”

I told him. His eyes widened with surprise at being cut off before he even finished stating his conditions.

“She is not a tournament prize.”

“Your Highness…” Arwen’s expression was strange. It seemed that she didn’t know what the knight was asking, and when she realized it, she looked moved by my words.

“I’ll bet something else instead,” I told the Templar Knight.

Carls approached me as if he had been waiting. He brought the sword that was given to me by the eldest son of Count Ellen.

“If you win,” I stared at the Templar Knight. “I will give you this sword.”

I watched as greed came into the man’s eyes.

Arwen quickly recognized the value of the sword and tried to hold me back.

“But Your Highness, I’d rather…”

“No. You are a thousand times more valuable than this sword.”

The value of a Sword Master could not be compared to this mid-level flashy sword.

Besides, I’m not going to lose.

“But what are you going to bet?” I asked him.

“I have a treasure. It may not reach the value of the sword, but I will bet it.”

I readily accepted it.

“Dunham from Fahrenheit. As an official knight of the Templar Knights, I am on the verge of the triple chain.”

His attitude was too confident and arrogant, but it was expected of someone who was approaching the triple-chain status.

But I wouldn’t be shaken by status like that.

“Double chain,” I answered.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“You have to say it the right way. The achievement you are on the verge of is not an achievement you have accomplished.”

At my words, Dunham’s face turned red, and he started coughing. But soon after, he composed himself and showed a casual expression.

A shameless person.

“Then, Sir Dunham, a Double Chain Knight. Does the Prince prefer a training sword or a true sword?”

“Whatever you are comfortable with,” I told him.

Dunham acted as if he didn’t want to use a real sword without me saying it.

“Let’s use the real thing,” I announced.

He smirked, then held out his sword.

The sword looked excellent, with a colorful and practical hilt.

“This is the 17th sword made by a craftsman who was declared a ‘Master Swordsmith’ by His Majesty. It is considered a luxury product. If Your Highness wins, then this sword will belong to you.”

“What a coincidence!”

I can’t help but laugh.

“Does it have a name?”

“No,” Dunham mumbled. “The master’s works were only given numbers.”

“Then, this is the same master’s 100th work.”

Twilight, the sword that the master poured his soul onto, was in my hands.

CHAPTER 29
START NORMALLY, FINALLY BE EXTRAORDINARY (2)

Arwen couldn't help but admire the First Prince as the apprentices rolled over in succession.

How long has it been since we parted ways?

On top of that, he was now facing an official Templar Knight.

She was excited to hear the sound of the wind as the swords swung, and powerful metal sound as they clashed.

However, instead of those amazing sounds, she only heard stupid words.

"This is the seventeenth work of the Master Swordsmith…"

"This is the 100th work of the master…"

The Prince and Dunham seemed to be competing about who had the best sword.

"I never heard that the master crafted his 100th sword…"

"He had. He finished it just a few days ago."

"I heard the last one he released was his 70th, over a year ago."

It was so childish to compare whose sword was better.

"Before he was able to finish this sword, he had melted quite a few of his works."

Dunham looked at it and looked resentful.

It was absurd. They were grown-ups, but they were like snot-nosed kids comparing

toys in the playground.

“If you can’t believe it, send someone to Count Ellen and ask,” the Prince added.

“Is that for real? Is that really the master’s final work?”

How long should they be doing this insignificant exchange?

“It is. And if you beat me, it will be yours.”

Dunham’s expression changed by the Prince’s provocation.

“Hwaahaaak-!”

As he yelled, energy could be felt in all directions.

He revealed his considerable power. His expression was as serious as ever.

The Prince smiled.

“Although you took the wrong path, I know that you endured a lot to reach that level,” he remarked.

She knew that the Prince had a mana heart, and he found it superior to mana rings. As he beat several opponents with mana rings, it seemed that his mana heart was indeed superior.

“I would like to express my respect to Your Highness by doing my best in this battle.”

Suddenly, Dunham’s sword was covered with a strange light. It was evident that it contained a lot of mana.

“Ha, respect…” the Prince laughed. “That sounds good.”

He had a peculiar smile.

“If only my people respected me…”

The Prince turn around. Arwen flinched as she saw the Prince’s expression.

However, the Prince's gaze was not directed at her.

"Adelia."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"Watch carefully."

"I will."

The Prince turned to Dunham once more, gripping his sword tight.

"This is how your skills would be in the future."

The Prince rushed in.

* * *

"How many have come before us?"

Count Bale Balahard asked, to which York Willowden responded with an insignificant tone.

"You're the fourth."

Bale frowned. York Willowden continued.

"While the First Prince was locked up in that palace, the Third and the Fifth Prince visited, and just a while ago, the Second Prince also came. The Fourth Prince has not come. Probably he won't be coming at all. Because he's not interested at the throne."

York Willowden kept his relaxed expression as he held a teacup to his lips.

"So…"

"The knights haven't chosen yet."

"I'm not here to discuss their choice…"

"It's not good for you to say that."

There was an edge in Bale's tone, which York criticized.

"Aren't things this way because of your choice? If the Commander of the Third Legion had supported him, neither the nobles nor the other princes would be in the positions they are now."

"I am a simple soldier. All I have to do is defend the border, not politics."

"Then go and defend the border. Don't pretend to be a political noble."

Bale shut his mouth at that. He knew it was partly his fault why the First Prince had been considered an outcast amongst the nobles and the knights.

But he had an excuse.

He thought his nephew was too stupid to be a king. He had been so ferocious in announcing it because he knew that the First Prince would be cancer to the kingdom.

His nephew wasn't just incompetent. He was explosive, greedy, and terribly impulsive.

Of course, he tried to heal his nephew's rot.

However, his efforts didn't bear any fruit, and he only earned his nephew's grudge.

At one point, he pulled his drunk nephew out of bed and struck him hard.

However, instead of the Prince learning his lesson, he tried to stab his uncle one day.

Bale realized then that his nephew could not be saved.

Disappointed and frustrated, he returned to the north.

Soon after, he received a gift from his nephew.

Poisoned liquor that shamelessly came with an enclosed letter.

Bale drank it, nevertheless. The cheap poison was burned by his mana. Along with the poison, his affection for his nephew, his blood and flesh, burned off.

It was only for the love of his sister that he agreed to meet his nephew again.

[To leave a child in the midst of the time when he needs a foundation… the king is showing the intention to leave him out as a legitimate successor.]

If that happened, the queen said, it would kill her.

If he refused her, she said, he would be taking her life.

So, even if he hated him, he went back to the palace.

He had no expectations that his nephew would change, and he had no affection left for him to want him to change.

All he wanted was to make him lose a little weight, then go back to the north.

However, the stupid creature he believed would never change did the impossible.

He started to change.

He endured the hard training and improved day after day.

He couldn't tell if it was because of the loss of memory, or from being brought back from the brink of death. The only thing that matters was that his nephew has finally changed.

He thought that he had burned off all his affection along with the poison, but it seems that remnants remained.

He knew that he had to start over and help the Prince regain the rights that were originally his.

That's why he wanted to reach out to the Templar Knights once more.

"You said it directly with your mouth," York Willowden couldn't hide the frustration from his voice. "You told us that the First Prince should never be a king."

Bale let York's cold voice pierce his ears.

"And now, you are acting like you are his guardian!"

Bang-!

York Willowden struck the table.

“What happened to everything we had planned over the last few years? If it’s going to be like this now, you shouldn’t have done that in the beginning. Have you ever thought about how confused the kingdom will be with your sudden change of heart?”

Bale had nothing to say because York Willowden’s words were true.

If the Commander of the Third Legion intervenes once more in the new structure of succession, there will be confusion.

But nevertheless, he would stand by his decision now.

“It was bad judgment,” he admitted, as he looked straight into York Willowden’s eyes.

His great friend. A knight of the Quad Chain, one of the five gifted ones like him.

“And now, I am correcting it.”

The person his nephew needs the most.

“Please give him a chance… at least so he can stand on the succession line along with the other princes.”

Bale bowed to York, who was astonished at what just happened.

Bale was a proud warrior who never bowed to anyone except His Majesty, the King.

“Please,” Bale kept his lowered head down.

York Willowden sighed. “I don’t know… did you change, or has the First Prince changed?”

His tone was gentler this time.

Bale didn’t answer.

“Let me think about it first,” York told him.

Suddenly, the door burst open.

“Sir Willowden!”

A breathless knight rushed in.

“What a fuss! You are disturbing us!”

However, it seems that the knight had something more important to do than to take the reproach of his leader.

“You have to come out, Sir!”

“What the hell…”

“It’s because of our visitor!”

At those words, Bale jumped out of his seat.

“Let’s go. Tell me about the situation as we walk.”

York Willowden stood up and hurried off with them.

* * *

“What the hell were you thinking?!”

The knight trembled as York Willowden’s temper flared.

He had just told them that the First Prince and Dunham Fahrenheit had started a battle with real swords.

“What the hell are we going to get out of it?!”

Victory will not increase the knights’ honor, and if the Prince suffers a wound, it would be him, York Willowden, who was in charge of the fortress, who would be accountable.

“Don’t worry,” York turned to Bale. “If it was Dunham, he’s pretty talented. He would know how much power he could use, and when to stop… but why the hell is he so stupid!”

Bale Balahard responded briefly, “Oh no, I’m not the one who should be worried right

now."

York Willowden looked confused, "What?"

"It's you, not me, who should be worrying."

York Willowden frowned as Bale continued.

"I fought the First Prince a while ago… and I had to use the Aura Blade in sparring."

York's eyes widened in shock. *What is this man saying?!*

"You should pray that your knight wasn't hurt."

"That's really weird," York Willowden said, his complexion turning pale.

They quickened their steps. They had to stop the battle before anyone gets hurt.

However, it seems that they were too late.

"Wow!"

As they reached the grounds, they heard the crowd shouting.

"Ahhhhh!"

Then, they saw a screaming figure flying.

York rubbed his eyes.

He knew that flying figure.

It crashed to the ground with its tongue hanging out and with its eyes half-closed.

That bloody mess on the ground was a Templar Knight.

What happened?

York Willowden looked around. Knights clad in iron, shouting in excitement, oblivious that their Commander had come.

The First Prince was standing in the middle of the crowd, holding a longsword. The Prince was in good shape, his shoulders heaving up and down as if he was out of breath, but without any wound or scratches.

“Didn’t I tell you,” York heard Bale Balahard’s amused voice, “that I had to use the Aura Blade?”

The Prince suddenly shouted before Bale’s words even sunk in.

“Next!”

CHAPTER 30
START NORMALLY, FINALLY BE EXTRAORDINARY (3)

Uncle had a habit of talking about it.

Double Chains are better. Mana hearts can only withstand the power that a single ring could contain.

It seemed like he was not exaggerating.

The moment my sword clashed against Dunham's, I realized it. My stomach grumbled. It was different from when I dealt with Uncle. At that time, I was using the [Poem of the Dragon Slayer]. Now, however, I could only use [Poem of the Dalian], an ordinary poem.

[Dalian Poetry] could not protect me from the strength of the two rings resonating within each other.

I pressed down the rumbling inside me and exhaled loudly.

I could see Dunham's face through the black light shining from his sword.

His eyes were like a hawk's eyes staring at its prey.

Bang-!

The moment our swords met again, I felt another wave run through me. But instead of folding, I endured and swung my sword again. Dunham's sword blocked it before my silver-lighted blade reached him.

"Ha!"

I caught my breath, then spun, my sword making a half-turn slash. Surprisingly, Dunham was also there, his sword in a vertical position blocking my attack.

Bang-!

Iron against iron; mana against mana.

Bang-!

The inside of my body heated up as if I was on fire. The heat excited me.

Bang-!

I was deaf. It's probably because of the mana bursting out of me.

"…!"

Dunham's mouth moved, but I couldn't make out what he is saying.

I cannot hear him.

I could only hear the sound of our swords clashing. Even that seemed to come from far away.

I was on fire, but strangely, my head was cold.

My sword was constantly moving as if I wasn't holding it. Now, I could not even feel the shock whenever our swords met.

Am I tired? Did I run out of mana?

I saw Dunham's eyes. They were filled with speculation.

Why can't I feel the wave anymore?

Even when I thought hard about it, I couldn't come up with an answer.

In the meantime, my sword kept moving.

Bang-!

At one point, I felt my skin tingle.

I saw Dunham raising his sword.

It was in slow motion. I saw the faces of the onlookers, among them Adelia and Arwen.

It was ridiculous to see the girls with both their mouths open as if they were expecting my next move.

When I moved my eyes again, I saw a flash falling from the sky.

My sword moved by itself, just enough to block the beam of light falling from the sky.

As the beam of light touched my sword, my sword suddenly glowed more intensely.

At that moment, I felt a dull sensation. The shock rocked my intestines. I clenched my teeth.

Bang-!

Dunham's sword could not stand against Twilight.

Dust scattered as it crashed to the ground.

Then, my sword bounced up, turning towards Dunham's shoulder.

A silver line appeared in its trail. One second later, bright red blood splattered.

"…!"

Dunham's mouth was wide open.

When I pulled back the sword, blood splattered again.

Then, I found myself behind Dunham, hitting his back with my sword, and kicking him behind his knees.

Kwap-!

He knelt, but he grabbed the opportunity to pick up his sword. Then, he spun, swinging his sword as strong as he could.

Huh-!

When I opened my eyes, Dunham was flying in the air.

Then, another knight appeared.

And another. And another. Each had a completely different face.

I didn't know who they were, but they were rolling on the ground when I saw them.

"Next!" I yelled. I could feel the heat in my face.

Slowly, the world returned to normal.

I began to hear the crowd.

"Petton passed out!"

"Oh my God, he won again!"

"Five straight wins!"

My chest was heaving. My mana heart was exhausted and empty, and I could feel my muscles twitching from time to time.

My heart seemed as if it was going to burst. My mouth is dry. Every time I breathed, my lips seemed to crack.

The insane cheering of the knights had brought me back to my senses.

I remembered everything.

I beat Dunham, and after that, I competed against four more knights.

I won against all of them.

When I realized that, something flashed in my mind.

"While competing for a hundred times, I endured a thousand waves."

“I will be proud even in front of a larger wave.”

Through the haze of my mind, I heard a low tune.

“Now, I lift my sword.”

A new verse.

『The rating of [Dalian Poetry] has increased. 』

『[Dalian Poetry] has changed from [Ordinary] to [Extraordinary]. 』

Messages popped out one after another.

『[Dalian Poetry] has become [Poetry of the Duel].』

Only a few hours after arriving at the Templar Knights’ fortress, I got what I was hoping for.

I turned around slowly. It felt like there was no strength left in my body.

“Your Highness!”

At that moment, strong hands caught me. The unfamiliar hands supported me gently as I sat down.

Weakly, I tried to turn my eyes to whoever it was that helped me.

It was a stranger. A stranger wearing the uniform of the Templar Knights.

There was a strange expression in the knight’s face that I didn’t see from them before…

Respect.

“Your Highness,” the knight smiled, revealing white teeth. “I salute you for your victory!”

Shouts suddenly erupted from the crowd at the knight’s words.

“Honor the sword of His Highness the First Prince!”

“Honor for that duel!”

“Salute for His Highness’ victory!”

The Templar Knights raised their sword as they cheered at me. The men who acted like they wanted to eat me were now looking at me with admiration.

Then, I heard a heavy voice.

“They have a simple nature…”

It was York Willowden, the Commander of the Templar Knights.

“Swords and victories. Nothing else makes them enthusiastic.”

At his words, I looked around again.

Some smiled at me and gave me thumbs-ups; others were in energized discussions about the five victories; others were giggling at their fallen colleagues.

As I stared at them blankly, I heard Uncle talk to me.

“You must have thought they would be resentful…”

I nodded.

I was finding it strange that they did not raise their swords against me to restore their honor and fame.

“A fair defeat is more valuable to them than an ugly victory. As long as someone gave their all, winning or losing is not important. Losing is not dishonorable.”

York Willowden nodded. “The fame of the Templar Knights does not fade after a few defeats in sparring.”

“But Dunham may be a little resentful,” one of the knights joined in, “because he will be giving his prized sword to His Highness!”

The other knights laughed and made fun of their colleagues.

Certainly, the Commander and Uncle were right. The knights seemed to be excited about the battles they just watched rather than being upset about being defeated.

"Arwen…" I called for her, who promptly strode over and stood beside me.

The knights' mood seemed to dampen a little as they watched it.

They are poor guys stuck in a secluded fort, waiting for the day their swords could be used.

The only flower they had, the Arwen they loved, was now coming with me.

I laughed.

One thing hasn't changed. The spirit of revering the strong has remained the same.

* * *

After that, I stayed in the fortress for two more days and continued competing with the knights. Some of them were knights that I hadn't seen on the first day, while some were there to get Dunham's sword back.

Of course, I won all the battles against them.

I faced everyone, even those who were high-ranking knights amongst them. I earnestly accumulated verses for my poem.

Finally, it was time to go.

"See you next time," I told York Willowden and the knights after I got on my horse.

"Safe travels, and see you next time, Your Highness."

I paused and remembered something I had to ask York Willowden.

"Please keep everything that happened here a secret."

He looked confused. "Wouldn't it be helpful to tell others about it?"

Of course, his words were true. But now, I was familiar with having the reputation of

an idiot. It didn't bother me. It didn't matter to me.

Instead of answering, I lifted three fingers to York Willowden and counted them down one by one.

"First, they wouldn't believe it."

"Second, if they believe it, they would want to fight me."

"Third, it's all going to be a headache either way."

York Willowden chuckled. "Alright, I am willing to do that."

I turned around. The greetings were over.

The court knights, Adelia, and Arwen, followed me. Uncle was already ahead of us.

"Uncle!" I yelled at him as I tried to catch up.

"Do you have anything to say?" he slowed his horse.

"The banquet."

"What about it?"

"Can we make it sooner?"

Uncle looked at me with a puzzled face.

"How soon?"

"As soon as possible."

He furrowed his brows. Then, he added.

"Like… as soon as we return?"

CHAPTER 31
I CHANGED MY THINKING AND SAW DIFFERENTLY (1)

The court knights were busy preparing the camp.

Carls said he wanted to look around and disappeared; Arwen took his place next to me.

I looked at her for a moment before going into the carriage.

“Your Highness.”

Adelia bowed her head. Beside her, I saw a sheet perfectly laid, without any wrinkles, and a pillow that was neatly placed.

I was wondering why she hasn’t come out of the carriage. It turns out she was busy preparing this.

An S-class swordsman was doing maid chores.

It was like cutting meat with a legendary sword.

“Ha!”

“Oh, Your Highness, is there something you don’t like?”

Adelia had an anxious expression. She was really worried that she made a mistake.

A few days ago, that same face looked as if she wanted to devour the Templar Knights.

It was a really bizarre combination: weak and servile, yet thirsting for blood and war.

I have to work hard to make her become a person worthy of her fearsome trait and talent.

“Would you like me to prepare it again, Your Highness?”

She trembled as if she didn’t know what to do.

“No, it’s alright.”

After saying that, I lay down and closed my eyes.

My head was filled with complicated thoughts.

Mana chain, mana heart.

When I competed with double chain knights, I realized more about them.

When I opened my eyes in this body, every day was a series of disappointments. I watched people with infinite possibilities weighed down by those mana chains. However, they believe it was superior to mana hearts.

It’s arrogant and stupid, I thought.

However, after meeting the Templar Knights in person, my thoughts changed.

During my stay at the fortress, I used the power of [Judgment] countless times. Through it, I checked all the qualities of the knights around me.

Most of them had C-class talents. I rarely saw a B-class one.

At that level, they wouldn’t be able to reach the threshold of Sword Master even if they spent their whole life cultivating and polishing their skills. If they build amazing karma, they could probably transcend it, but that won’t be easy.

If they had been born in the past, with mana hearts, the highest they could attain to achieve would be Sword Expert. They would have to train their whole life to even reach that.

However, with their double-chains, they already achieved the status of Sword Experts at their young ages of the 20s and 30s.

After seeing that, I could no longer deny the change that mana chains have brought.

No one would be able to achieve superhuman feats anymore, unlike in the past.

However, the skills of the average swordsman have risen dramatically.

No superhuman, more swordsmen.

After 400 years, humans have become weaker… and became stronger.

Uncle was one of the five quad-chain knights in the kingdom. Even without seeing his full power, I could grasp a good estimate of his skills.

In the past, he would be a person looking for transcendence.

The mana chains would only be tying him down and limiting him.

But, with the current state of humanity, there were no more opportunities left to build karma beyond the extraordinary level. There was no more need to be a superhuman.

Thus, I decided.

The past will be left as the past. I shall watch the new age without bias.

Only after that could I be able to judge which was truly better.

“A clean slate,” I smiled. “Like when I was born as a sword and was brought into this world.”

It’s a good attitude.

I heard a familiar voice. When I looked up, I saw Uncle’s face in the carriage’s window.

“It’s not too late now. Do you know what I am thinking?” he said, smiling a little before he continued.

“If you try hard from now on, you will be able to bring everything back to normal. Besides, you’ve already won the hearts of the knights.”

What the hell? Uncle’s words were really absurd and had no context.

“Unlike the court knights, the Templar Knights are people with different origins, and

they were locked in at that fortress. Their knowledge of noblemen is very lacking. In fact, some of the noblemen that visited there were received as strangers," Uncle explained.

I didn't know about this. I thought all the knights were the same. I was unaware of their difference to the court knights that came with me.

In the first place, they only told me their names before our swords met. They never told me anything else. I had no idea about them. In my eyes, they were simply knights. Warriors that I have to fight.

"Because they were such, you made yourself known in a radical but effective way," Uncle continued.

What is he talking about?

I just fought to raise the level of my Muhun-si. However, Uncle seemed to be thinking that I had a greater motive behind my actions.

"Although that's not enough to get the full support of all the knights in the kingdom…"

It was only after hearing those words did I realize what Uncle was pertaining to.

"York Willowden is an outstanding knight and a seasoned politician. If there is any disagreement, the voice of the Templar Knights matter in the discussion."

My Uncle was thinking that I had been fighting to make the Templar Knights mine.

No, absolutely not. I just needed victories to include in my poem.

In the first place, whether I was in their favor or not, it didn't matter to me.

My only concern was to regain my strength. The power that I had in the past.

"The other princes wouldn't have been able to get along with the Templar Knights that quickly."

Uncle's expression was strange.

It was amused.

It seemed like he was proud.

No way, it can't be. There's no way.

"It was a very smart judgment," he smiled.

Uncle was really praising me.

I was embarrassed. On one strange day, my Uncle, who always considered me as trash, praised me.

"Are you crazy?" I was embarrassed. Uncle, who should have been furious at that, did not take offense.

"You seem to be unable to remember our bet," he said.

"Our bet? Beating the Third Prince?"

Uncle shook his head.

"No. Double-chain. I bet that you won't be able to defeat a double-chain knight."

"Ah…"

That was right. I had already beaten double-chain knights several times. Moreover, they were considered elites in the kingdom.

The bet is over.

The winner will be paid.

But… what was the bet about?

I couldn't remember the price we committed.

"As promised, I will give you my full support from now on."

It was only after hearing Uncle's words that I remembered what the bet was for.

Uncle's guardianship and full support.

“When we return, I will officially disclose my position.”

Uncle’s eyes shone brightly. He looked more determined than I have ever seen him before.

“The Templar Knights, and the Commander of the Third Legion.”

He sounded like a general who had a great battle ahead.

“That would be enough to start over.”

After talking alone, making conclusions alone, and deciding alone, Uncle left.

“No, Uncle!”

I hurried to call him back.

He glanced back for a moment, then continued walking.

Trust me. His eyes seemed to be saying. *I’ll do it myself.*

I have no idea what he’s about to do.

* * *

“Your Majesty.”

Bale Balahard gave a brief report to the king upon returning.

As always, the king simply shook his hand, as if he wanted him to go, but Bale suddenly stepped forward.

“I want to do what I had put off.”

The king, who was leaning back on the throne, raised himself in an upright position upon noticing his strange attitude.

“Speak.”

“From now on, I will try to properly serve as the First Prince’s guardian.”

The king stiffened.

“Are you talking about being his guardian as his uncle, or as the head of the Balahard family?”

His tone was as hard as his expression, but Bale Balahard didn’t care about the king’s reaction.

“Both, Your Majesty.”

It was the same thing he told the First Prince on their way back. Upon arriving at the palace, he would formally announce his position.

“As the head of the Balahard family, as the Commander of the Third Legion, as the Captain of the Black Lancers, as a Quad-Chain Knight… All those Bale Balahards would be the First Prince’s guardian.”

He didn’t want it to sound like a declaration of war, but he could not keep the determination out of his voice.

The king chuckled. His sharp eyes had a different expression. It was different from the contempt that the king had shown me recently.

The king’s eyes were sparkling with a little admiration.

“Good. I will keep that in mind.”

The king’s voice was as sharp as his eyes.

* * *

“It should have been this way from the beginning, but I’ve stepped away from it too much,” Uncle told me with regret.

“Now, His Majesty will have no choice but to think of the honor of the Balahard family whenever he deals with you.”

After saying that, he said we would get busy in the future, and that we had a lot to do.

Then, he left without waiting for me to respond.

The court knights expressed their congratulations after Uncle left.

“Congratulations, Your Highness. Now, a lot will change in the future. Please be prepared,” Carls said.

I saw people pretending not to glance at me.

Each passing servant, maid, and knight had changed thoughts and emotions.

I realized that the world around me has changed with that announcement.

CHAPTER 32
I CHANGED MY THINKING AND SAW DIFFERENTLY (2)

It wasn't really special that Count Bale Balahard declared himself as the guardian of the First Prince. It was just natural that a respected count would become the guardian of his nephew.

However, the repercussions of that natural thing were not so simple.

In the past, the Count criticized his nephew's nature and gauged his qualities as those of a tyrant. Then, the Count withdrew all his support from him. As a result, the prince rapidly lost the respect of others, and eventually, he was made an outcast. Then, it was made public that the King has disowned his eldest son.

The Count was praised for it. He was praised for his high and noble cause, that he didn't choose blood over the well-being of the kingdom.

However, the Count has now overturned his decision.

He did it at a time when the King has already deprived the First Prince of the rights to succession, and when the First Prince's position was to worry more about his confinement rather than his succession rights.

The nobles could not understand why the Count overturned his decision.

However, they knew the impact of it.

Count Bale Balahard owns one of the only five quad-chains in the kingdom. He was a high lord whose wide territory encompasses the northern part of the kingdom. His family possessed the Black Lancers, whose fame and glory was only second to the Templar Knights. These soldiers were trained in fighting monsters in the mountains. As such, the Balahard family's strength cannot be ignored.

With such prestige and power now behind the First Prince, his status soared quickly.

Of course, that did not mean that he was now the most influential candidate for succession.

While he was confined, the other Princes made steps to strengthen their position and gather support. Even with the great Balahard's support, it would take a lot for the First Prince to cross the gap between him and his brothers.

The only thing he had that could overrule his brothers' claim was his legitimacy. He was, after all, the First Prince, the eldest son.

But in the King and the kingdom's eyes, his offenses and the scandals he had caused had already piled up so much, to the point where none of the nobles wanted to be under his banner.

* * *

The palace was busy.

There were new court knights, maids, and servants wandering around. I knew they were spying on me.

It was all so troublesome.

I couldn't bear it anymore and yelled at Carls.

"Make them leave!"

"Your Highness, these people are under His Majesty's command. Even if I command them, they will not listen."

"Then, at least, get them out of my sight!"

It was only then that Carls stepped forward and drove the newly assigned escorts outside of the palace. One of the chief maids I had come out and led the new servants and maids away.

Only then did I feel safe from the secret gazes that I have been getting.

"That's better."

I thought I could finally take some rest, but suddenly, the Third Prince arrived.

“Why are you here?”

I asked with an annoyed tone at his unannounced arrival.

The Third Prince’s eyes narrowed.

“It’s pretty exciting…”

What is this guy talking about?

“I heard you’re planning some trickery with Count Balahard.”

He looked as if he had taken offense about my training as if it was unfair.

“What? Who did you hear it from?”

“Did you think you could beat me now? Thanks to that, our battle will only be more exciting.”

The Third Prince arrived out of nowhere and did not have any intention to answer my questions, only to say what he wanted to say.

“Yes. All right, now, please go.”

“You’ll find that it isn’t good to trick me, who came in good faith. I was just trying to save my brother’s face.”

“Thank you then.”

“My brother made a really big mistake.”

The young man’s face looked very harsh.

“I’m thinking of making you pay for your treachery…”

Seeing that evil gaze, I leaned back on my chair.

“So?”

It seems that my relaxed attitude at his threat further infuriated the Third Prince.

“It looks like you don’t understand… I’m saying I’ll give you a nightmare that you won’t forget your whole life.”

I said nothing.

“If I were you, I would rather live the same as I did. A life of girls and alcohol. Don’t be so greedy.”

“Is that all you have to say?” I pointed at the door. “When you’re done speaking, go. Stop bothering people.”

“Even without that, I was about to go.”

He looked as if he lost his momentum, but he kept pretending that the conversation was going according to his plan.

“Please enjoy the upcoming banquet.”

His grin was evil as if he thought that I could not avoid another accident at such gathering.

After that, he rose from his seat and turned to the door.

He stiffened for a moment when he saw who was standing there.

It was Uncle.

The Third Prince recovered quickly, and gave Uncle a slight nod, before passing by him and leaving the room.

Once the door was closed, Uncle approached me.

“Why did you just let him leave like that?”

I shrugged.

“A child who didn’t know better could not make me heat up. Besides, we were already scheduled to fight.”

We heard that the Third Prince was doing quite a bit of work himself. There will certainly be quite a number of spectators on the day of the sparring.

Uncle shook his head.

“His temper is an evil one.”

“You’re one to talk. You’re the one who created this mess, Uncle.”

The sudden increase of the servants, the sudden visit of the Third Prince – it all happened after Uncle’s declaration.

“Tsu,” Uncle clicked his tongue.

“You could have at least delayed it,” I chided him.

“Until when? Until the other princes have finished preparing?” he rebuked me.

I also had my own plans.

I don’t intend to spend my whole life in a palace.

With moderate strength and moderate finances, I was planning to escape the palace.

Of course, it was not that easy. However, in the worst case, I was prepared to fake my own death just to be able to leave.

But before that, I need to find the sword – my actual body – that was hidden by the King.

“Just because you don’t want it doesn’t change the situation,” Uncle said, taking me out of my thoughts.

“I am not interested in the throne.”

Uncle thought I had changed to regain the things that I have lost. But that was wrong.

In the first place, I wasn’t losing anything.

The throne wasn’t mine from the start.

How do I lose something that wasn't mine? Why would I want to get it back?

If there was anything that I wanted to recover, it wasn't the throne, but the power and strength that reached transcendence.

"Just match the beat for now. Dance with the tune. Consult with me and work hard," Uncle said as if the race for succession was simply a stream you can dip your feet in and out of as you wish.

"Are you doing this for the Balahard family?" I asked him.

However, instead of getting angry or looking embarrassed, Uncle burst out laughing.

"As long as the royal family and the nobles remember the harshness of winter, they will have nothing to do with the Balahard family."

The Balahard family, Uncle explained, acted as the shield that protects the kingdom from the monsters in the northern mountains. No one could replace them.

I admired his overflowing confidence a little.

"But remember," he sounded firm. "The rights of the firstborn don't disappear unless he dies. If you need time to accept the situation, take all the time you need. We won't force you until you're ready."

"No matter how much time you give me, I won't change my mind…"

Uncle left it at that and disappeared from the room.

No matter how much time passes, I will not change my thoughts.

My decision was firm.

At least, it was before I attended the banquet.

* * *

"The Viscount and Viscountess Artuen Farinel from the Southern Farinelle Estate are entering!"

The great doors opened after each booming announcement.

One by one, the nobles began filling out the luxurious banquet hall.

Upon entering, they start looking around to find acquaintances or family members, looking over the carefully prepared mountains of food.

Soon, the spacious hall will be filled.

They gave and received polite greetings, and insignificant conversations came and went. It was the same scenery as with any other banquet.

Taylor Tailheim looked around with a nervous face. Until now, only nobles from the rural areas have entered the room. But it seemed like the nobles are entering by rank. Soon, insignificant nobles such as the Tailheim family were pushed into the corners as the great nobles arrived.

“Baron Rockwell?”

“Oh, long time no see, Baron Tailheim!”

Fortunately, there were quite a few rural nobles who had been pushed in the corners with them, and Taylor and his father found acquaintances.

“Isn’t the banquet hosted by the royal family really extraordinary?”

“Yes, it’s too much. I’m feeling a little embarrassed being here.”

As he said it, Baron Tailheim’s gaze was directed at the nobles gathered in the distance, waiting to be announced.

“Well, we must take this great opportunity and enjoy it. There will not be many like us who have been invited by the First Prince directly.”

“Yes, it wouldn’t have been easy to receive an invitation with his own royal seal.”

At that, some of the rural nobles around them nodded at each other and expressed their gratitude at having been invited by the First Prince himself.

Baron Rockwell and Baron Teilheim looked over at the other rural barons at their side,

then at each other.

“Did you…?”

“Yes. My son was invited by His Highness the First Prince a while ago.”

“Oh, my second son, too…”

All of them had a bad experience with the First Prince, but strangely, they have been personally invited to the banquet. The rural barons quickly felt a sense of sameness and started talking to each other animatedly.

Some of the nobles frowned at them.

“I see. Some people who were not cultured are also called nobles…” One lady remarked to herself.

“Right? The great lords are entering, but they are making a fuss.” Another responded.

Baron Tailheim and the other rural nobles blushed and fell silent.

“Hmm, it’d be better to talk a little later.”

“Let’s do that because the great lords are entering soon.”

After a while, the great lords and counts began entering the banquet hall one after the other.

“Count Verok Graham of the Eastern Graham Estate and his second daughter, Anne, are entering!”

“With Count Polt Ronen of the Western Ronen Territory……”

Each of the lower nobles who had entered in advance approached the great lords and paid their respects.

The country nobles watched from their corners. Since they were not acquainted with any great lords, they could only watch their prestige from afar.

“Marquis of Trindel Mendelheim and his eldest son Klasman from the southern

Mendelheim estate are entering!”

The pinnacles of the noble ranks, the marquises and dukes, have started to enter, as well.

And soon after, the attendant shouted loudly.

“The rightful successor of His Majesty the King Lionel Leonberger, the eldest son of the Leonberger royal family, His Highness Adrian Leonberger is entering!”

At that moment, everyone turned their heads towards the entrance of the banquet hall.

The great doors opened slowly, revealing the notorious First Prince.

CHAPTER 33
I CHANGED MY THINKING AND SAW DIFFERENTLY (3)

Blurred features buried in disgustingly thick flesh; a bloated body covered by an outlandishly colored outfit.

The First Prince's appearance was as famous as his rude and nasty attitude. Every noble in the kingdom knew how he looks.

So, the hall was filled with confusion when the First Prince entered.

The door revealed not a highly obese ugly man, but a handsome man with a well-trained body. He was well-proportioned, almost looking like a knight, and his simple black outfit suited him well.

The only flaw in his appearance was his arrogant gaze, but it suited his position and could be overlooked. In fact, his seemingly rebellious attitude even looked impressive.

The nobles were in awed shock. They heard the news that the First Prince has changed. They heard the rumors that after his near-death, he had started training. However, they did not expect the extent to be this huge. He looked entirely like a different man in just half a year.

"Pay due respect to the descendant of the noble Leonberger lineage!"

Only then did the nobles expressed their courtesy. The lower nobles knelt, while the high lords bowed their heads.

In their heads was the same thought.

How could this happen in just half a year?

The Prince's change was too sudden and too severe.

The Pig Prince, a symbol of indolence, no longer existed.

“For a banquet, the atmosphere is too dull,” the First Prince said.

The musicians, who stopped playing in fear and astonishment, remembered their duty and started playing. Soon, the atmosphere lightened with a sweet melody filling the hall.

The nobles couldn’t help but stare at the First Prince.

He was looking around the hall with his chin raised, oblivious to the stares.

Even though the high lords were quite aristocratic, the Prince was on a different level.

The First Prince they knew was an ugly man with a severe sense of inferiority. He was infamous to take offense at people staring at him, thinking that they were laughing at him. Whenever he catches one staring at him, he would certainly start insulting that person.

But now… the Prince was calmly taking the gazes pouring at him. Now, it was the nobles who couldn’t stand his stare.

Whenever one has eye contact with the Prince, they quickly turn away. It was as if the Prince was staring right through them. They could only bow their heads. It was only the high lords who met that gaze.

Instead of avoiding the Prince’s eyes, they approached and greeted him. The Prince accepted the greetings of the nobles who were much older than him with an arrogant expression.

As if he was accepting greetings from his servants.

Taylor Tailheim felt proud as he watched it.

Such a great prince sent an invitation directly to his family.

Nothing of the past bad experiences remained in his mind. Only pride and gratitude.

He slowly stepped towards him. Hopefully, the Prince could remember him.

As he approached, he could hear the high lords talking to the Prince.

“You look amazing, Your Highness…”

“Your face reminds me of His Majesty when he was younger…”

Are these the great lords of the south and the east? Taylor thought.

They seemed eager to please, with their smooth tongues and bright expressions.

“That’s a lot of fuss. I just lost some weight,” an indifferent Prince answered.

At the Prince’s words, a high lord from the south frowned, his pride seemed hurt at the Prince’s indifference. Still, he didn’t leave the circle surrounding the Prince, basking in his glory.

It was natural. The nobles were sensitive to the flow of power; the great lords create the flow itself. For them, the Prince’s transformation was a variable that should not be taken lightly. They should ingratiate themselves immediately.

Taylor felt his low rank as he got closer. He lamented his position, where he could not squeeze in among the high-ranking nobles. Maybe, he should just be happy that the Prince sent them invitations.

His shoulders drooped, and he started walking away. It was a bit disappointing, but he should be satisfied enough that he experienced the splendor of the royal road. He slowly walked toward his seat at the corner of the banquet hall.

Behind him, he heard the buzz of the high lords.

Suddenly, he felt a strong grip on his shoulder before he could even figure out the reason for the uproar.

“You should say hello since you’re here,” he heard.

When he turned around, he saw a handsome face, and behind it, the depressed face of the great lords.

“Your Highness!”

The Prince smiled. “You’re hurting my ears.”

“Sorry, I’m sorry, Your Highness.”

The cultured lords and ladies would have used the words ‘regret’, rather than ‘sorry.’ However, Taylor didn’t care. He was just happy that the First Prince noticed him amongst the crowd.

“Where are the others?” the First Prince asked.

“Oh, we sit there, Your Highness.”

“They came! Let’s go.”

The First Prince strides towards the corner of the hall, were the rural barons were seated.

Taylor stared at the Prince’s back in astonishment. Then, he felt the eyes of the high lords upon him.

The looks were no different from the gazes that the Prince received, but Taylor wasn’t a prince.

He walked after him with his head down.

* * *

I could see the insides of the great lords who surrounded me and refused to leave.

Maybe, they were trying to figure out how I’ve changed over the past half-year, and what my plans were in the future.

But they wouldn’t know that I was peeking inside of them as they were trying to peek through me.

The power of [Judgment].

I checked the abilities of everyone I encountered in the banquet hall. Even the high lords could not escape my power.

Some of them were incompetent; some were capable. Their abilities vary, but they had one thing in common.

They had a dirty thing called [Snake's Mind] in their trait column.

It was a sign of those whose greed has reached its peak. It was the stigma of bad karma for those who took things from others and ruined lives.

All around me were these filthy things. It's a completely rotten crowd.

I could almost smell their foul stench.

Four hundred years ago, my friend fought day and night against monsters. He protected those who were driven from their lands, those who were exploited. He cultivated barren land, built a village on that land, built a fortress, and raised a castle. He even had to defeat a dragon to establish and protect this country.

But now… that country is filled with snakes.

The descendants of those who suffered from exploitation were now the exploiters.

It was terrible.

I wasn't in the mood to play games with the high lords. Fortunately, I saw a familiar face in the distance.

I saw a young man, the eldest son of a rural baron, whom I met before.

It was nice. Although he might not be competent, I'm very happy with the young man's energy.

"Your Highness? Your Highness, where are you going?"

I left the Earl of Somewhere hanging and followed the young man. The look of surprise he gave me when I grabbed his shoulder was refreshingly human.

It seemed to me that he was the only human in this hall.

There were several more with him. The banquet hall was particularly bright, but in a shady corner, rural barons were gathered. Some of them looked familiar; the others

were not.

I walked towards them.

“Your Highness!”

When they saw me, they bowed their heads with worried expressions. Knowing their previous experience with the First Prince, I understood why they looked like that.

I thought it would be enough for me to get stronger. I thought the country my friend built was safe enough to continue on.

Only now did I realize how rotten this country is.

Then, I heard someone getting announced.

“Eternal friend of the Kingdom, the Marquis Montpellier, ambassador of Burgundy, under the authority of His Majesty the Emperor of Burgundy, is entering!”

He was announced later than the eldest son of the monarch caught my attention.

Burgundy.

That hateful name.

The country that bled this kingdom 400 years ago, the old enemy that my friend had to fight for the longest time.

The nobles of my country began bowing their heads in front of the Burgundy ambassador. They showed more respect than they gave me – a member of the royal family.

“It’s been a long time, Prince Ian.”

The Burgundy ambassador looked at me and smiled arrogantly.

As if he was talking to a subordinate.

My heart was pounding.

I was burning inside as if I swallowed a fireball.

CHAPTER 34
PAST RELATIONSHIPS (1)

The heat rising inside my body is threatening to explode.

Suddenly, screams broke out.

“Hey!”

At the same time, I felt something cold pouring down my face. The strong smell of liquor struck my nose.

“Your Highness, are you okay?”

An old man stood in front of me.

“I was in a hurry to say hello to my brother. I’m so sorry, Your Highness.”

The old man wiped my face with his sleeves. Contrary to the panic that filled the banquet hall, his eyes were calm.

Our eyes met.

His wrinkled eyes seemed to have a lot to say.

I looked behind him, towards the Burgundy clan. The Ambassador was frowning because the fuss has interrupted our meeting.

“I have to change my clothes,” I told the old man that accidentally poured wine over me.

“I am so old; my body is not listening to me anymore. I’m so sorry, Your Highness. I committed a great disrespect.”

The old man apologized again.

I shook my hand at him and turned around.

I was quickly surrounded by Carls and the other court knights.

“Your Highness, let me help you,” Carls said.

“Who is it?” I asked him.

“The Marquis of Bielefeld.”

Bielefeld. I turned my head once more.

The Marquis of Bielefeld bowed his head.

“Not everything is rotten, it seems,” I murmured.

“Your Highness?” Carls looked puzzled.

“Nevermind.”

I felt liquor creeping down my nape.

Ah, the old man spilled too much.

Liquor ran down my hear when I shook my head.

* * *

“Your Highness?”

Adelia ran after seeing me soaked and immediately started wiping my hair with her sleeves.

“No, I’m going to wash off, anyway.” I shook my hand and started taking off my clothes.

As the water ran through my hair and on my face, the sticky feeling from the wine gradually disappeared, but the feeling of dirt and filth remained.

I saw a lot of things that I didn’t expect at today’s banquet.

In just a few hundred years, the country was totally ruined. It wasn’t just a mess. The roots were totally rotted out that it cannot be used anymore.

The descendants of those who have risen up for the powerless turned to snakes, and the wicked Burgundy clan were treated with respect and admiration right in the heart of the kingdom.

As I thought about it, fire rose again from within.

The ambassadors of the Empire were acting with arrogance; the nobles were allowing it. It seemed as if it was the natural thing to do; as if it was the way it always had been.

Has the Empire and the kingdom made peace over the past 400 years? Did they decide to become allies and bury the old grudges?

I don't think so.

The atmosphere was too tense for it to be called peace, and the power was too one-sided for it to be considered an alliance.

The Burgundy clan acted as masters, and the nobles of the kingdoms acted like subservient dogs in front of them.

The King's face came to mind.

He always looked so proud of himself.

He always laughed or got angry at the incompetence of the First Prince, but he allows the nobles of his country to worship the nobles of the other countries.

It was absurd.

"I heard that something happened."

When I turned, Uncle was looking at me.

"I heard about the rough accident with Marquis Bielefeld," he added as he made his way to a chair.

"What the hell were you trying to do?" His eyes dug deep into mine.

What did anyone try to do when they saw a member of a Burgundy clan?

It was an unfamiliar question for me. It was a question no one asked in the past.

It would have been obvious to anyone.

To kill them or get killed trying.

Uncle continued nagging. “The Marquis said you looked like you were going to hit them.”

“I’m not that impulsive.”

Of course, I was burning with impassioned hatred, but even without the Marquis’ intervention, I would not have done anything.

I know there must be some circumstances that I didn’t know.

First, I have to find out.

“What the hell happened to this country?” I asked. “Please remind me.”

Uncle’s face turned serious.

“The kingdom stood firmly against the numerous invasions of the Empire in the past. It suffered great damage, but every time, outstanding knights came out and repelled the invasions. The kingdom didn’t give up even a single piece of land to the Empire, and the Empire failed over and over. But things have changed over time…

As time went on, the Empire grew bigger, and the gap between them and us began to widen. The scales of the battles grew to the extent that our outstanding knights could not defend the country anymore. Soon, our small country was forced to kneel in front of the Empire.”

It was history. Nothing too special. But as I listened to it, my heart grew heavy.

“Did the gap started to widen about 200 years ago?”

Uncle nodded.

I closed my eyes tight.

It was the same in the past and now. Our country has always been smaller than the Empire. However, the kingdom of the past had the spirit and strength not to surrender to the Empire.

Because this country has something special that no other country has.

It is a country founded by those who have been outcast.

It was a country that was able to build its foundation while fighting day and night against monsters and those mighty lords from the Empire.

It was a country that defeated a dragon.

It was no wonder that numerous poems and songs were born on that difficult journey.

There were surprisingly many [Myth] and [Hero] level poems and songs in this small chunk of land.

Those poems and songs were the power that protected this country against all enemies.

But where are all those songs now?

Forgotten and erased.

The people ceased to believe. The songs of the unbelievers were nothing but vain stories.

That is why it has come to this point. Knights who reached transcendence disappeared and the only ones left learned the art of mana rings.

After a long time reflecting on it, I opened my eyes.

Uncle was in front of me. A knight who would have been called a Sword Master in the past had a defeated expression on his face.

“Uncle.”

Maybe I would regret it, but…

“I changed my mind.”

No, I will surely regret it…

"I will try it."

Nevertheless, I have to do it.

"I'm going to be the King."

Maybe, people would tell me that I didn't deserve to be one, that I only stole this body.

To them, I would answer: This country is mine. This country was founded by my friends and me.

* * *

Uncle was very happy with my decision, but at the same time, he expressed concern.

It seems to him that my change of heart was so sudden.

Still, he accepted it as it is, and left to do some tasks.

The unpleasantness on my body disappeared after the bath, but I did not return to the banquet.

Uncle and Marquis Bielefeld made excuses to the other nobles, so there was nothing to worry about.

There were two more days left before the banquet was over. I would have to attend those.

The next day, I went to the banquet hall, putting more effort into dressing up. Uncle accompanied me.

"The rightful successor of His Majesty the King Lionel Leonberger, the eldest son of the Leonberger royal family, His Highness Adrian Leonberger is entering!"

"The Commander of the Third Legion and the proud guardian of the kingdom, Count Bale Balahard of the North, is entering!"

As the day before, gazes from numerous nobles started pouring on to me. Some have

already seen me the day before; others were seeing me for the first time.

They showed more respect and politeness to the Burgundy clan than me.

In the past, when my friend stood in front of the people, no one thought that he would be King. No one recognized him as a monarch.

To them, he was just a little country boy who had been outcast. He was among those who were exploited.

But my friend raised his head and ignored what the people said. He stepped forward proudly.

It was the same position that I am in now.

“I stood tall in front of the sheep…” I began murmuring.

『[The King’s Poem].』

『You’re unable to use the poetry with your current ability. 』

『Part of the poem is omitted. 』

『Part of the poem is omitted. 』

『Part of the poem is omitted. 』

『You can only sing one line of the poem.』

I felt a piercing pain in my mana heart as if it was being torn apart. But I could bear it.

This is a [Hero] level poem, not a [Myth] one.

Even if I could only handle the first line, there was no other song that suited this situation.

“I stood tall in front of the sheep.”

A low tune resounded in my head. The next moment, the mood in the banquet hall changed.

The nobles who were shamelessly staring at me began to fall to the floor and kneel. The high lords began to bow their heads.

I walked on, looking at everyone who has not yet yielded to me.

They looked confused and surprised. Those who were laughing or talking froze, and found themselves bowing their heads.

One by one. Step by step.

I was standing in the middle of the banquet hall, with nobles worshipping me.

“Raise your heads!” I loudly announced after I reached the peak of momentum.

Suddenly, as I watched the nobles and the lords began getting up to their feet, I felt a strange gaze.

It felt alien yet familiar at the same time.

I turned to where the gaze was coming from.

A being dressed in an outfit distinctly different from the other nobles was walking towards me.

It was walking towards me, its head covered in a large hood. Its steps were light, almost as if it was floating.

As the creature approached, a fresh scent filled my nose, the thick smell of flowers and grass. I immediately knew what it was.

“An Elf?” I asked the hooded being.

Suddenly, it took off the hood covering its face.

For a moment, the surroundings turned bright. The entire banquet hall seemed to hold in its breath.

A fatal beauty.

However, I could not enjoy the extreme beauty that was right in front of me.

Because she wasn't supposed to be here.

Why is she here?!

CHAPTER 35
PAST RELATIONSHIPS (2)

「Eyes resembling starlight」

「Lips that look like pomegranate」

「Cheeks that look like honey」

「Forehead lovely as that of a newborn child」

「A voice as delicate as a chirping bird」

The most beautiful creature created by God.

「Pure, without lies」

「Innocent, uncontaminated」

A kind nature that could not harm even the lives of small creatures.

「A flower that blooms for a thousand years」

「A lifespan that compares to giant trees」

Forest beings that live between 300 to 1,000 years.

Beautiful, pure, kind.

That was what people commonly think of Elves.

There is a fatal mistake at what they thought.

Elves were by no means pure, innocent, and selfless.

They were insidious, calculating, and at the same time, terribly self-righteous.

The myth about the good and benevolent Elves was a fantasy created by those who were smitten by their angelic appearances.

I knew them better than anyone else.

I've been with them many times in the past.

They were a cruel tribe that could ruin others using their beauties as baits.

Among such elves, there are especially more dangerous ones.

「High Elf」

They were the [Heroes] of the Elven tribe.

In front of me was not only a [High Elf] but an [Elder High Elf], one who has lived for nearly a thousand years.

「Dancing Magic Swordsman, Sigrun」

Sigrun was a member of the expedition that killed Gwangryong in the past.

She was such a maniac that even in my sword form, she bothered me to a terrible degree.

She looks exactly the same as she did 400 years ago.

Her eyes had a persistent gaze on them.

I have been a sword for hundreds of years, and I have nothing to be afraid of.

Except for Sigrun. This Elf is not completely sane.

[If your master dies, will you go with me?]

[We will have fun for life.]

[Forever. No one could handle you better than I.]

When I recalled her ecstatic expression as she touched my slender body, I felt chills down my spine.

Sigrun licked her lips.

“I didn’t think there was someone who remembered that poem,” she said.

I didn’t expect that she was here, so I used Muhun-si.

However, she knew it well and recognized it immediately.

I turned my head away, hoping she wouldn’t recognize me.

Fortunately, she didn’t. Her face didn’t show any suspicion.

I am completely different from what she knew me in the past.

I am now the eldest son of the Leonberger family, not a sword.

A sigh of relief came out of me, unconsciously.

“It seems that the descendants of the Dragon Slayer have not yet forgotten that victory.” She smiled sweetly. “I apologize for the late introduction. I am Sigrun, representative of the delegation who visited to confirm their friendship with your kingdom.”

I took her greetings as calmly as possible.

“I am Adrian Leonberger.”

Sigrun had a curious expression on her face.

“Hmm?”

She tilted her beautiful head.

Instantly, the noblemen clutched their chests and looked hungrily at her.

I felt uncomfortable at the behavior of the nobles who were easily deceived by her appearance. What would they look like if they found out that inside that fresh appearance is a thousand-year-old monster?

I quickly tried to dispel the wary look from my face. It wouldn't be good to stimulate Sigrun.

She has one of the best swordsmanships within hundreds of years, and at the same time, she was unpredictable.

I didn't want to bet my life against her.

Nope.

It seems that today's banquet was also ruined for me.

Yesterday, the imperial ambassadors, today, a chance meeting with an insane elf.

As I quietly began to step away from her, Sigrun stepped closer.

"By the way…" her head was still tilted with an inquisitive expression. "Where have we met?"

Goosebumps crawled all over me.

"You feel strangely familiar…" She added.

"This is the first time I've seen an Elf with my own eyes," I told her.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Her eyes searched mine as if she was trying to look inside me.

High Elves already have the [Hero] characteristic since birth. I couldn't guess what her rating, which was already high 400 years ago, could be now.

I just hoped she hadn't reached the point where she could see through all things.

"You're lying," she said in a quiet tone, but her words shook me.

"There are two different reactions that a human seeing an elf for the first time would do."

Her expression was light as she continued to speak with a quiet tone.

“Fascination. Or, like Your Highness, caution. The usual reaction is the former, while those who have reached a considerable level fall into the latter. Strangely, you look too young to reach that level…” She was smiling, but I found it was terrifying.

“Ah… my taste is different,” I managed to blurt out.

It didn’t sound convincing. Elf’s beauty is transcendent. Even wicked orcs fall for their appearance.

To say that you have a different taste in front of such an absolute beauty… what a rubbish excuse.

But what else could I say? As she said, there was no man who doesn’t get fascinated with her.

Sigrun, I know, was a woman of extreme pride.

She smiled once more before taking a couple of steps backward.

“I am very happy to meet you.” She said before putting her hood back on and walking towards her seat in the corner of the banquet hall.

“Ah…”

Men around the hall sighed when she covered her face with the hood. Their eyes followed her as if they were possessed. Some of them had eyes that were oozing with greed and longing.

It’s embarrassing.

Even if they were deceived by her innocent appearance, they should not attempt to touch her. An Elf’s retribution has no mercy.

I clicked my tongue and turned around.

I saw Uncle. It seemed that even he was defenseless against the Elf’s beauty. A sighed flowed out of his mouth as he watched her walk.

If Sigrun came today with evil intentions, this country was over.

“Her Majesty Queen Margarita, modest ruler of Leonberg, the benevolent and beautiful companion of His Majesty King Lionel Leonberger, is entering!”

The Queen appeared as I was deep in thought about the elves’ presence.

The Queen looked very impressive with her graceful and dignified appearance.

The somewhat cluttered atmosphere cleared up at once. The nobles knelt all at once.

“Ian,” The Queen walked straight to me with a cheery look on her face. “Looking at you like this, you really look like His Majesty when he was younger.”

She really liked my elaborate outfit.

“Come with me.” She took my hand and led me to the podium. “Don’t think about leaving early today.”

She sat on an impressive chair on the podium, and I took the chair next to her.

There were several empty chairs on the podium, among them, the King’s.

“His Majesty will be present tomorrow,” she told me. “So, if you want to take that chair today…” her eyes twinkled, “have fun.”

The Queen then rose from her seat to give a quick speech to the nobles.

Then, music began filling the hall again, as the high lords and nobles came one after another to pay their respects to the Queen.

Their words and actions were different from how they treated me.

So, this is the dignity of true royalty, I thought.

I smiled bitterly. She didn’t even have to use the power of Muhun-si. I still have a long way to go.

I wasn’t upset by what I saw. As I progress towards completion and transcendence, this dignity would follow anyway.

“What do you think?” the Queen suddenly asked me while I was deep in thought.

“About what?”

“The kid I was talking to just now?”

I inadvertently followed her gaze. I saw a young girl about ten years old. The child twisted her body as if she was shy as my eyes met hers.

“Her family is great, and there are no flaws with their character. She would have a lot of sophistication by the time she becomes a woman.”

When I finally understood what the Queen was talking about, my expression darkened.

“Can’t you see she’s too young?”

The child, who looked embarrassed that she had been considered a child rather than a woman, turned away.

The Queen started nagging at me, but I wasn’t listening.

After a few moments, the Queen introduced another candidate to me.

She was older than the first one, but still too young to be called a woman.

I shook my head.

Since then, the Queen continued to show me several other candidates, and each time, I shook my head.

“You are choosing a queen, Ian. They are not like the woman you’ve always dealt with…” she kept nagging at me as quiet as she could, as if not to attract attention. Wise, healthy, comes from a great family… after extolling the virtues I need to consider, she called in the next candidate.

The candidate and the woman who appears to be her mother turned around after I shook my head again. Somehow, they looked relieved.

After that, several more candidates appeared.

I kept sighing and shaking my head.

The Queen also sighed deeply at every rejection.

We kept at it for a long time.

Then, a group wearing hoods approached the platform. It was Sigrun and the elves.

“Sigrun from the Mistletoe Clan greets the beautiful Queen Margarita,” she smiled sweetly and bowed.

The Queen was amazed at the Elves’ visit.

“It’s just amazing that you could come today. The Elves are a long-time friend of the kingdom since the time it was founded,” the Queen rejoiced.

“It seemed that the queen is looking for a woman to be His Highness’ companion, is that right?”

As the Queen nodded, she smiled.

“When our King sent us here, we didn’t know why. But now, I seem to understand,” her eyes fell on me.

“What does the Her Majesty think of our clan?” she asked.

“A close friend, and a friendly neighbor,” the Queen responded quickly.

“Don’t you think that it would be better to call us your family rather than your friends?”

Sigrun’s smile grew bigger.

I soon realized why I felt anxious when I saw her here.

“What does that mean?” The Queen asked.

“I am a High Elf. In a human setting, I am an aristocrat of a fairly mighty family.”

Oh, my God.

After I kept complaining to the Queen that she was showing me candidates who were too young, the oldest candidate in the world appeared.

“Fortunately, my age is not that different from His Highness’s age…”

The abominable Sigrun just said an outright lie.

I feel my mouth is getting dry.

CHAPTER 36
PAST RELATIONSHIPS (3)

At first, I thought she was joking.

I asked her if she thinks that a beautiful, good, and long-living elf was the ideal type for a man's bride.

"It's ridiculous to form these words in my mouth, but yes, my race is the ideal spouse for humans."

She was lying so smoothly.

"Oh, and humans value groups, not individuals, right? I have a large following. I am always surrounded by elves who were like counterparts of the knights you have."

I felt more suspicious as she began to introduce the Sentinels of her tribe like a commodity.

"I have everything His Highness requires."

I turned to the queen and saw that she was seriously contemplating Sigrun's proposal.

It wasn't just because of her appearance, but the values that she had discussed.

The queen asked her with a sincere face.

"You've only met Ian for the first time today. Why are you making such a bold proposal?"

Sigrun laughed.

The moment I heard her laugh, the hair on my whole body rose.

I knew that look she has now.

Its how she looks when she finds something she really likes.

Or when she finds something she really dislikes.

Her goodwill and malice always end with the same results.

Destruction.

“From the moment I saw His Highness, I felt that my destiny was bound to him.”

The Elves were a cunning tribe capable of making lies sound like the truth, but there is only one thing that they don’t lie about.

Destiny.

The higher ranking the Elf, the more serious they take destiny.

Sigrun was the Elder High Elf of the Mistletoe Tribe.

She had silver eyes unique to High Elves. They were sparkling like jewels as she looked straight at me. It was a gaze that would send any other man to insane ecstasy.

I felt that my life is going to have a drastic change the moment she told me that our destinies were intertwined.

“You’re really bold!” The queen exclaimed with a red face. She must have taken Sigrun’s words as a kind of confession.

No, it was absolutely not.

I sighed and stood up.

The queen looked at me. I looked at her face and asked her for patience.

“I need to talk with her privately,” I told her.

The queen’s expression changed. She must have misunderstood, but now is not the time to clear her misunderstanding.

“Let’s go.” Sigrun smiled brightly and held my arm.

An act that was deliberately intended.

Sighs flowed from all over the banquet hall. It seemed that everyone was watching us.

The nobles were looking at me with jealousy, envy and greed.

As they saw me walk with a beautiful elf, their natures were blatantly revealed.

With those uncomfortable gazes, I called Carls.

“Find us a place where we can speak in private.

Carls could not take his gaze off Sigrun. Still, he was a triple chain knight, and he handled his emotions well.

Carls brought us to a room that was completely closed, a cozy place prepared for nobles who wanted to rest from the banquet.

“Make sure no one disturbs us,” I told him.

As we walked to this place, I felt like we were secretly being followed.

Carls pounded his chest in a show of loyalty and stood with his back at the door.

I closed the door. When I turned around, I saw Sigrun’s beautiful face.

“Sigrun. Speak your real purpose.”

She smiled. “I came to show the alliance between my family and the kingdom. I have no other intentions.”

“I will ask you again,” my voice was firmer, “Elder High Elf Sigrun.”

Her acting stopped when her true identity went out of my mouth.

It was as if a mask was torn off her.

“The Elder High Elf Sigrun, the executioner; the sword of the Elf clan,” I prodded her.

Her expression was lifeless. It was as if she was a wax doll.

“What is your real purpose?”

If it was a simple show of friendship, a High Elf would have sufficed. Not an Elder. Definitely not an Elder who carried out the killings of the clan.

After a few moments, she opened her mouth.

“It’s funny…” Her voice that was as delicate as a bird chirping now sounded as dry as an old tree.

“How did you know about me?”

I didn’t answer. I was forced to step in when she tried to control my fate, but that did not mean I would expose my identity.

“If you knew that I was an enforcer, don’t you think it is stupid to stay silent in front of me?”

“I know that it’s just as stupid as talking in front of an executioner.”

Her eyes narrowed at my words.

Her gaze no longer looked like sparkling starlight. Now, it looked insidious and terribly evil.

As I looked into her eyes, I saw her karma. Countless deaths. Flesh torn to pieces. The karma that she had built for over a thousand years struck me.

But I wasn’t shaken at all. The countless deaths she showed me were of no threat to me.

Because I have my own share of blood and deaths.

“Don’t play around, Sigrun.”

Her eyes went wide open. I knew that she was still acting. She had been doing this for a thousand years. Most of the emotions she reveals were simply learned habits.

“Do not interfere with my destiny,” I warned her, with every bit of my hundreds of years of being a sword and this short, stupid human life.

Whatever I did, I knew that it was insignificant to her.

Her soul has reached a place so high that I could not measure it.

Her eyes, which had already reached transcendence, could have had a glimpse of my past.

Then, I deliberately hid my existence.

That way, she will feel even more curious.

As if she had just seen the tip of the iceberg.

As if she had tasted only a bite of the food that was immediately taken away from her.

“Who are you, really?” She asked.

“I am just a poor prince.”

“No, really?”

“Well… If you really want to know, you must see it.”

If she could see the past, she would also be able to see the future.

The future I wanted.

Sigrun glanced at me. I waited quietly, then felt her unknown gaze probing inside me. I gave her a little time, before hiding my existence once more.

She shook her head.

“The way the King said it was weird. I asked him, why did you send me on this mission? And he simply answered that I should be able to figure out why…”

Little by little, life began to seep again into her dry voice.

“But now I know…”

Her lifeless face turned beautiful once more.

“It was because of you!”

She laughed.

It was the face of someone who was full of anticipation, like a person enjoying the fragrance of a delicacy being cooked in front of her.

* * *

The eyes of the nobles almost popped out when they saw us return to the banquet hall.

What did you do in the back room?

What did you do with the beautiful elf?

I could see the low curiosity, jealousy, and lustful imagination in their gazes.

I ignored it all and walked silently.

Sigrun followed me with a shy expression, as if she wanted to fuel those looks further.

We stood in front of the queen who was still sitting on the platform.

“I have something to tell you,” I told her.

“Tell me.” The queen’s eyes looked bright. Sigrun with a shy face, her son who looked so determined. It was easy to misunderstand.

And that was exactly what I wanted.

The queen turned to Sigrun, who nodded back at her.

“I decided. I will marry Sigrun,” I announced.

As I did, I felt as if vomit was coming out of my mouth. I never thought of the day I would speak these words.

The queen smacked her armrest in shock. “Marriage with an Elf?”

She was probably thinking about the political advantages we could get with marrying a High Elf.

I continued speaking to the queen.

“But it’s an important issue so we must not decide quickly. We all need time before we finalize it.”

The queen needs time to think.

Sigrun needs time for her prey to mature.

I need time to develop my strength to escape against this lunatic elf.

We all needed time.

CHAPTER 37
AFTER I FINALLY FOUND A PLACE TO BE (1)

When I attended the banquet again the next day, more people were watching me than ever before.

Those who were not satisfied with watching even approached.

They were asking me and speaking to me about all sorts of insignificant things.

Sometimes, I answered with the same blarney; other times, I direct their questions to someone else.

If I let go of the conversation and started moving to another place, a different group will form around me.

Is this how a banquet really is? It was so exhausting.

When I was a sword, it was a place I wanted to be in, but now I know that it was tiring, uncomfortable, and not fun at all.

The queen watched me. Not knowing how I felt, she seemed happy to see me socialize. It seems that she liked seeing me getting the attention of the other nobles.

Then, the damn imperial ambassador appeared.

“Prince. I heard you were engaged to an elf.”

Montpellier’s tone was arrogant as if a prince of a small country was unimportant.

“I could not attend yesterday because of my duties, but I certainly missed a good sight,” he said, with a fake expression of sadness.

“But why are you alone today?”

A strange heat was in his eyes.

Greed. Longing. Lust.

His instinct toward elves was obvious.

I did not accept her proposal because I wanted it, and I didn't really intend to get married, but on the surface, Sigrun is indeed my fiancé. The attitude of treating the Prince's fiancé like a cheap dancer was truly infuriating.

I turned my head. Many people nodded at Montpellier's words. No one pointed out how dirty he is. Everyone has the same thought as him.

It was absurd. But in the end, I cooled my anger.

"Could I meet with her once? Unfortunately, elves do not exist in the empire."

Montpellier continued to speak with his detestable mouth.

I looked up the platform.

The queen's face was pale. In any case, she looked worried that I would cause trouble.

It was the same with the King's face. Even though his eldest son's fiancé was treated as a cheap dancer, their expressions were only one of embarrassment.

Was it because he hated me?

No. No matter how much he hates me, a king should not allow this to happen.

A king should step in when a dog of the empire acts as if he is the owner of our kingdom.

A king should step in when a Prince was insulted.

But no one came forward.

So, it was all up to me.

"Marquis. Do you think that the fiancé of a prince is a cheap dancer that would come at your beck and call?"

At that moment, it was as if all the air in the banquet hall had been sucked out. The

music stopped playing, and the buzz of the nobles' conversations stopped.

The nobles looked at me with pleading eyes as if they wanted me to apologize.

The look on the King's eyes wasn't as explicit as the nobles, but the emotions contained in it weren't that different from the others.

"How dare…"

I heard Montpellier's voice. His face was red-hot.

The imperial dog opened his mouth once more.

"A prince of a small country scorns the marquis of the great empire…"

"A prince of a small country points out the rudeness of a marquis of another country."

Everyone in the room held their breaths.

"How dare…"

"Shut up, before I cut off that tongue."

The nobles' mouths fell open as if they were screaming silently. Everyone in the hall was pale.

As I looked at their faces, I thought that perhaps, from this day onwards, I would suffer more contempt than before. It would become impossible to get their support.

I knew that what I'm doing right now is stupid.

But this is the way I should go.

The souls of those who turn their eyes away for the sake of fake peace will gradually lose its light.

The compromiser could never attain transcendence.

"Hey!"

The Marquis of Bielefeld appeared. Like he did before, he staggered in and spilled alcohol as if he was drunk.

But today, he spilled it on Montpellier, not me.

“Oh no, I made a huge mistake! Apologies!” Bielefeld began to fuss and started wiping Montpellier’s face with his sleeve. He shot a knowing glance at me as he did.

“You have to change clothes! Oh no, I’m so sorry. I did not want to hurt your precious body!”

The trembling Marquis Bielefeld started to lead Montpellier away.

I laughed at his impudent acting.

“Let me go!” Montpellier roughly struggled against Bielefeld, trying to get rid of him, but Bielefeld’s arms were strong.

It was a rare sight to see. An elderly Marquis of Bielefeld holding down the sturdy Montpellier effortlessly.

“Damn it!”

Exhausted, Montpellier turned away and let himself be led.

As they went, Marquis Bielefeld looked at me once more. Reprimands were contained in those wrinkled eyes.

Soon, they disappeared outside the banquet hall.

The atmosphere was still the same. The cold eyes of the King and the nobles were staring at me.

But it was only for a while.

They started ignoring me. It was as if I was invisible, although I was right in the middle of the hall.

“Your Highness.”

If it wasn't for Sigrun, who arrived late, I would have ended my own banquet like that.

With her appearance, the mood of the banquet hall rose again. Those who acted as if I was invisible saw me again and began approaching me.

Approaching Sigrun, to be precise.

"Your Highness is really a fun person," she leaned in close and whispered.

"I'm not here to have fun."

"I'm looking forward to three years from now," she said with glowing eyes and a beautiful smile.

* * *

The Third Prince Gillian Leonberger was upset when he heard about the First Prince's engagement.

"It's not enough to break the Flower of the Templar Knights; now, an Elf?!"

Originally, he had no intention of attending his banquet. However, after hearing the rumors about the Elves, he could not bear it anymore.

He slipped in the banquet uninvited.

He thought the fiancé would look like a beautiful woman, but her appearance was actually even beyond what he imagined.

His belly twisted with envy.

After the banquet, he sharpened his sword. He wanted it to be as sharp as it could in the upcoming duel.

"Should I make him look like an idiot? Or maybe I would kill him and pretend it was an accident…"

No. Killing would be a problem. He decided it would be better to cut off his manhood.

Gillian kept thinking about how to deal with the First Prince. It was a fever that

consumed him every waking second.

He wanted to inflict the most humiliating defeat possible.

Perhaps, with that, the elf woman would break up their engagement and choose him instead.

He smiled at that delusion. Just thinking about it was fun.

Gillian kept waiting for the day to come.

Every day passed like a year; every week felt like a decade.

Finally, the day of the duel came.

As he carried his sword over his shoulder, his eyes roamed over the crowd.

“Why? Are you expecting someone?” The First Prince asked him.

It seems like the elf woman did not come with him. Gillian’s plan to win in front of her was destroyed.

He brought his sword down and sighed in a deep sense of loss.

“If not, let’s start right away.”

He’s rushing to his ruin, Gillian grinned at the thought and nodded.

The Court Knights Commander Count Schmilde Stuttgart stepped forward.

The Count was a notary sent by the royal family to officiate in the duel and prevent any unfavorable circumstances.

“His Highness First Prince has challenged His Highness Third Prince as his opponent, is that correct?”

The Count started the ceremony before the official duel.

The First Prince nodded casually.

“His Highness Third Prince has accepted the challenge with His Highness First Prince, is that correct?”

“Yes,” Gillian quickly responded.

“Both would like to prove their swords here, but only one will enjoy it. God will choose one of them with an impartial eye, and those gathered in this place will become those eyes to decide victory and defeat. Therefore, the truth of the result is beyond words. Your Highness, do you both agree?”

The two princes nodded at the same time.

“Both Princes want to prove their swordsmanship and wants to be the winner, so I declare that the battle has been established. This was granted by His Majesty King Lionel Leonberger, the legitimate ruler of the land, and notarized by Schmilde Stuttgart, who received the honored title as the Commander of the Court Knights; no one can object to the result…”

It seemed a lot to say about one sword fight, but the Count didn’t care.

“The war begins. The match ends when one side cannot continue the match, when one admits to defeat, or when a notary judges that the victory or defeat could not be determined. The winner must be generous to the loser, and the loser must not challenge the winner’s rights.”

When the Count stepped back, the First Prince immediately stepped forward.

Gillian also stepped forward, raising his sword expectantly.

“Both Your Highnesses, hold up your sword. I beg you, please don’t let this battle hurt Your Highnesses’ righteousness.”

The Count finally announced the start of the duel.

Gillian laughed at the first Prince.

“I prepared a grand audience for my brother. Do you like it?”

Since it was so soon after the banquet, the Third Prince was able to invite a far greater number of nobles than he originally expected. It was regrettable that the elf woman

did not attend, but it was still a good thing to embarrass the First Prince in front of these people.

The First Prince twisted his head and told him, “You talk too much.”

Gillian’s expression hardened.

“I hope it will be the same when the duel is over,” the First Prince added.

Gillian raised his sword. Numerous styles came to his mind. Among them, he chose the most glamorous and most complex swordsmanship.

He adjusted his stance, and fixing his stare towards the First Prince’s figure, he charged at him.

His momentum was as sharp as his sword.

He couldn’t get destroyed by someone who had learned low-level skills such as mana hearts.

Gillian hit the ground faster, but strangely, it seems that his opponent was getting farther away.

Suddenly-

Kudangtangtang-!

In Gillian’s eyes, heaven and earth changed positions countless times. He felt extreme pain on his chest. It was crazy. He couldn’t understand why he was rolling on the floor, or why the First Prince was standing on top of him.

“I wanted to play with you more, but I’m a little busy.” The First Prince’s voice didn’t sound like mockery. It sounded apologetic.

The Count immediately approached Gillian.

“Your Highness, are you okay?”

Gillian wanted to say that he was okay, and tried to get up.

However, he couldn't speak, nor could he get up.

He could hear the voices of the onlookers.

"Uh, what happened?"

"Was he knocked out?"

Gillian looked at the Count's eyes, who seemed to be pitying him.

"As the notary of this duel, I decide in the name of the King that the Third Prince could not continue the duel anymore."

No. I can still fight.

Again, the words did not come out of his mouth.

"The winner is the First Prince!"

As he heard the Count's declaration, his eyes began to spin, and finally, it went black.

* * *

The nobles who were watching were at a loss for words.

No one expected that the Third Prince, renowned for his swordsmanship, would get beaten up that easily.

The Third Prince convulsed a little then passed out completely.

The First Prince stood calmly, with his sword down. He didn't have any excitement or sense of accomplishment that the winner should have. Instead, he was just staring at his brother with a gloomy face.

Then, he suddenly raised his head and looked around.

"Did you get the show you wanted?"

The nobles felt intimidated as the First Prince stared at them angrily. They lowered their heads instinctively and exchanged worried glances.

“Nobles coming to watch a children’s fight… tsu!” The First Prince clicked his tongue, then started walking away.

Nobody said a word until he was far gone.

Then, they started to open their mouths.

“Did the Third Prince really lose?”

Someone said so. The nobles began to disagree among themselves.

“But how?”

“Yes, how? The First Prince had only started training a few months ago, right?”

“He was caught off guard! He was struck before he could even use his hand!”

“Right! It was a cowardly attack!”

Watching them, Count Schmilde Stuttgart spoke in a cold tone.

“As the observer and the notary of this duel, I will warn you. If there is anyone here that casts a fake opinion about the fair game that took place today, he is casting doubt about my honor.”

At his words, the nobles who were talking fell silent.

The Count stared at the direction where the first Prince went.

“It was amazing…”

There was admiration in his voice.

* * *

It took a full day before Gillian recovered his consciousness.

He blinked for a few moments, then screamed after realizing what happened.

“Fuck it! Damn, damn, damn!”

He began throwing anything that he could reach.

Hearing the turmoil, the attendants rushed in his room.

“Your Highness!”

His insides were burning up. It was embarrassing to fall like that in front of the audience that he himself gathered.

“Get ready! I will go to the First Prince’s Palace!”

At Gillian’s words, the attendants seemed restless and started looking down at their feet.

It was as if they wanted to say something but couldn’t.

“Have you not heard me?! I will go and compete again!”

I will be very vigilant this time, he thought. *I didn’t know how I got hit, but I will not be hit like that anymore*.

The unexpected ability of the First Prince was surprising, but if he focused properly, he is confident he would win. His opponent’s power is coming from an outdated artifact that collects mana in the heart. There was no reason for him to lose if he used the mana on his rings.

It must be done quickly. He ground his teeth.

However, his escorts and attendants have not moved.

“I said I would go back and avenge my disgrace! How many times should I tell you?!”

His personal knight, who was usually quick, procrastinated. Finally, he spoke.

“Your Highness, the First Prince has left.”

“What? Where would he go? He is not allowed to go to the entertainment districts outside the palace!”

“Your Highness, the First Prince is not on the royal road.”

Gillian was dumbfounded at the knight's words.

"Your Highness, the First Prince left with His Excellency Count Balahard."

"Where to?"

"I heard they were going north, to the Balahard Fortress."

Gillian was stunned for a few moments, then started stuttering.

"B-but… me…"

The court knight bowed his head at his 14-year-old master, who has lived a vain life.

"Ahhhh!"

Gillian started screaming and throwing things again.

* * *

"Do we really have to leave this quickly? What's the hurry?"

Uncle asked me as our horses ran.

"The royal road is not the place for me anymore."

The moment I answered back against Montpellier, the air around me changed.

I could feel the hostility and contempt from everyone. I realized that none of the nobles would ever stand by my side.

It wasn't sad.

I didn't want to cling to those who groveled at the dogs of the empire.

It was better to invest my time in something else rather than paying attention to those pathetic creatures.

"Is there such a place where you'd fit?"

I laughed at Uncle's question.

"Don't you think the soldiers and knights would fit me more than the nobles?"

"They are not brighter than the nobles, but they are much more conservative. It won't be that easy to win their hearts."

"Well, if I roll the mud together with them, I would surely get something that I won't have from the nobles. What are you so worried about?"

Uncle shook his head.

"I don't know. I can't help but think that you're in too much hurry."

Uncle's words made sense.

After the banquet, we sought permission from the King to travel north, and immediately after given permission, we sped off the royal road immediately.

"Even Marquis Bielefeld said so," I told Uncle. "He said I won't get anything on the royal road. Why would I throw my life staying there?"

When the banquet was over, Marquis Bielefeld came to me.

He didn't express his support right away, but he gave me some helpful advice.

He told me to create a force outside the royal road.

"But you're going too fast. If you are in a hurry, you start missing things. Isn't it time to tread carefully, step by step?"

"There is no time to relax," I told him.

He couldn't know. The scariest lunatic in the world is chasing after me.

The respite I have from Sigrun is not very long. I would really be marrying her. No, more likely, she would eat me alive. I have seen countless times how she destroys others.

It was still vivid in my memory to see her cutting limbs of her enemies, watching with

a satisfied expression, like a child pulling wings off a dragonfly.

Everything she was interested in had the same ending.

Now, she is interested in me.

Before her patience ran out, I have to hurry and build up my strength.

I knew it was impossible to surpass the strength and power of an Elder High Elf within a short period of time.

I would not be able to stand against the strength she had built up for a thousand years.

Unless I reached transcendence.

It was impossible to reach that on the royal road.

Peace makes a person weak and dulls his sword.

I need a place to accelerate my growth and sharpen my sword.

A place where humans are tested to their limits.

A place where Muhun-si could be born.

The place I should be on was the battlefield.

CHAPTER 38
AFTER I FINALLY FOUND A PLACE TO BE (2)

Every time the wind blows, snowflakes scatter. Every time I exhale, a pure white mist comes out of my mouth.

Winter was all around me.

I didn't know if winter had come in the length of our journey, or if the climate changed as we get further north. There was one thing I know.

"Oh, it's freezing to death!"

"If you can't bear it, you should go inside the wagon."

I shook my head at Uncle's words.

It's weather I need to get used to, anyway. I won't move in a wagon every time, so I had to get used to the cold. Besides, it was too stuffy in there.

"It seems like this old man is causing trouble to Your Highness."

The carriage window opened, and a familiar face poked out. It was Niccolo.

"If you think so, come down."

"If I get sick from the cold, it would be more troublesome for you."

"You said you wanted to come and learn."

Niccolo requested to join our expedition, saying that he won't have another chance to see the harsh north with his old and nasty body that was nearing its end.

"Unripe knowledge is poison, Your Highness, so I wanted to see it myself. Besides, the book I'm going to write this time is going to help you."

“It must be something awkward again.”

“Now, it’s not like that. Why don’t you come in and share a discussion with me? The savvier the commander’s strategy and tactics are, the less difficult it would be for his soldiers. My book this time is about the benefits of tactics and strategies…”

If I left it like that, I would have to listen to those verbose words until we arrived at the camp, so I pretended not to hear him and went ahead of the carriage.

Arwen was at the head of the ranks.

A red cloak fluttered behind her. She was wearing gray fur over a red coat, a garb exclusive for royal knights. She was riding a pure white horse.

She made quite the picture.

I could see the leading horsemen from the Balahard family steal glances at her as they rode. They were impressed by her beauty.

While she was really suffering from the extreme cold.

“Arwen, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Your Highness!”

Her words were garbled as if her mouth was frozen.

“If it’s too difficult, you could switch with someone at the back.”

“As a skilled person, I would not find comfort in that.”

A voice full of motivation. She was full of life like this since we left the royal road. The thought that she might soon face a real battle must have inspired her.

But not everyone was as motivated as she was.

I looked back.

They were seen walking some distance away from the soldiers of the Balahard family. They were thirty infantry and ten horsemen sent from the royal family. Their expressions

were unusually dark. They were like cows being led to a slaughterhouse.

The soldiers and cavalry who met my eyes bowed their heads. I was able to read the emotions that arose in their eyes at that moment.

Resentment.

After eating well and living well on the royal road, they were suddenly brought to the cold and bloody north, so it was understandable that they blamed me.

If these were the court knights and Carls, they would even tell me that directly. I would have liked that better than silent resentment.

Unfortunately, Carls and the others could not join me.

The King allowed me to go north, but he did not allow his knights to come with me.

[You can't bring a knight.]

The only knights I could bring were the two women, whom I've anointed as knights. The King only sent thirty infantry and ten cavalries as a formality.

He complained about it at the time, Uncle said.

"His Majesty could be thinking of the possibility that the court knights could be absorbed by the Balahard family."

It was as Uncle said. The King was blatantly keeping Uncle in check.

It was a very strange thing.

No matter how evil the original owner of this body may be, aren't I still his blood?

The King's hatred was overkill, to the point that he didn't care if his eldest son is protected, and he worried more about his knights going over to Uncle's side.

There must be an inside story I don't know.

We moved during the day and took a break at night after finding a suitable campsite. We headed straight north, facing the storming snow breeze.

After about two weeks, we saw a huge mountain range at the end of the horizon.

“It’s the Blade’s Edge Mountains. It’s the boundary that our family has kept for a lifetime.”

Uncle said, then he commanded the group to march faster.

“Balahard is a place where the climate is constantly changing. If we don’t hurry, we’ll be trapped in a blizzard.”

It was as he said. After traveling for two days straight and reaching a place where we could almost see the Balahard castle, a sudden blizzard began to rage.

If it weren’t for the Balahard soldiers who met us halfway, our caravan would have gotten stuck.

Uncle and the soldiers communicated to each other through several gestures.

The wind was howling too loudly for them to speak with each other.

After a few back and forth of gestures, Uncle announced the plan to us.

“We will leave the wagons and retrieve them later. We will take the horses with us, and we will all move on foot!”

After getting off our horses and passing the reins to the Balahard soldiers, I went straight to the carriage and opened the door.

“Take my hand!”

Adelia, who was fully prepared, held my hand as if she was embarrassed. Niccolo had an unpleasant gaze at me as I did, but I ignored it.

Adelia, frightened by a blizzard, stuck close to me. She did not look like someone who was approaching the Sword Expert status.

But what should I do? In the first place, she has a weak character. At least, it was better than a war maniac.

Niccolo stepped down of the wagon after.

"……!"

He spread his arms out and shouted something, but his expression was thrilled. I think he is expressing his feelings for nature and whatsoever over the majesty of this fierce blizzard.

I looked around.

Our horses were frightened. The soldiers of the Balahard family were struggling to calm them down and lead them.

Then, the royal soldiers that caught my eye.

The blizzard was overwhelming the royal elite, and they were falling down on the snow, swayed by the wind. They looked so different from the soldiers of the Balahard family, who were moving as if there was nothing unusual.

Uh.

One of them fell again and tangled with two other companions. The three of them rolled over.

I sighed.

"Arwen!"

"Your Highness!"

As soon as she heard my voice, she ran towards me amidst the wind and snow. She didn't stumble at all.

"Take Adelia!"

"I will!"

After leaving Adelia to Arwen, I ran towards the soldiers.

I lifted one to his feet.

"Huh, Your Highness!"

I shouted at the other soldier who still couldn't stand.

"You idiot! Take off your shield!"

They had wide shields on their backs, so it was hard for them to move against the wind.

The soldiers began to move more quickly as they heard my shout. Although their fall looked bad, it seemed that they weren't hurt at all.

The soldiers who were swaying around against the wind removed their shields and left them under the carriage.

"There you go! Okay! Now, you! The big one! Take the lead! Everyone, stick behind him! No, no, no! Don't gather around him! Stand in a row behind him! You idiots!"

* * *

"Abandon everything that is cumbersome except your swords! We'll get them back later! What? A royal gift? I am the Prince! You idiots! If you lose it, I'll give you new ones, so just throw it all away!"

The soldiers of the Balahard family looked back at the ruckus. The little Prince who came with the commander kept shouting.

He wasn't that big, but his appearance was like an experienced commander in the field.

The idiots of the royal road who kept falling down earlier began to move steadily.

The soldiers of the Balahard family were thinking of letting them suffer some more time before they helped.

It was a hazing in its own way—an initiation for royal soldiers who thought highly of themselves.

But because of the little Prince, their hazing was disrupted.

The soldiers of the Balahard family exchanged glances.

When they first saw the Prince, he was totally different from what they heard.

He looks like he had trained a lot. He looks like he had practical experience.

They admired him a little. However, they knew he wouldn't last.

He hadn't experienced the harshness of winter.

The soldiers thought that his majestic appearance would not last long. Going through the blizzard was hard labor that was hard to bear even for soldiers.

However, when one of the royal soldiers fell, the Prince took the man up his shoulders.

The Balahard soldiers were amazed at the sight.

A proud nobleman from the arrogant royal family; the Prince that was known to be rude and stupid, carried a soldier?

But there was something even more surprising than that.

The snowfield that grabs at their ankles takes away stamina, and the sight covered by a blizzard eats the mind. It was never easy to take care of someone in the midst of such a blizzard.

Even strong knights often fell when faced by such a blizzard for the first time.

But that little Prince was even leading the pace with the soldiers around him.

The Balahard soldiers looked at their commander with eyes full of questions.

What have you been doing on the royal road?

How could he learn this from the royal road?

Their commander shook his head with a little smile.

As if to say he couldn't explain it himself.

* * *

The blizzard disappeared as quickly as it has arrived.

It was just around the time we arrived at the castle of the Balahard family.

“Damn, if it was going to stop like this, it should have done so sooner!”

I yelled at the bright blue sky.

The royal soldiers were about to collapse with exhaustion from walking through the blizzard.

“Well… Your Highness?”

I was swearing inside when a voice interrupted my thoughts. When I turned, it was the soldier I lifted on my back.

“Thank you very much, Your Highness.”

I simply shook my hand at him. He bowed deeply several times, before disappearing into the ranks.

“Please find the royal soldiers a place to rest,” I told the Balahard soldiers. As instructed, they took the royal soldiers with them and disappeared somewhere.

As I was brushing off the snow that piled up on my head and shoulders, Uncle approached me.

“Is there a need for you to be so troubled?”

He’s right. It would have been enough for me to entrust supporting the soldier to another soldier.

However, it was Niccolo who answered Uncle.

“What His Highness has done will soon be widely known through the Count’s soldiers and the royal soldiers. If he wins the hearts of the soldiers after half a day, isn’t that a big deal?”

I frowned at Niccolo’s words.

He made it seem like I was a calculating person. However, it was correct.

Uncle looked at me, his eyes asking me if it was true.

“Wasn’t that what it meant to roll together in the field?” I asked him back before I raised my head.

Rather than a castle, the building looked more than a fortress. It had tall, endless walls. I could feel countless eyes looking down at me.

Soldiers of the Balahard family.

The enormous power they emanated poured into me.

My heart started pounding, welcoming the energy that rolls around me.

It felt as if I had been back to 400 years ago.

The only difference was that 400 years ago, this energy was not directed towards me, but my master.

Now, it was directed towards me.

That fact lifted my mood.

Upon reaching the gates, Uncle turned to me, with the soldiers behind him.

His face was that of a soldier, not a knight.

“The legitimate ruler of Balahard! As Commander of the Third Legion, we welcome the First Prince!”

In response, the soldiers around me and those upon the wall roared their welcome.

“The winter welcomes you!”

My heart was beating fast.

It felt like it had found a place to be.

CHAPTER 39
A SONG DEDICATED TO THE BIG, BEAUTIFUL GREEN MASS (1)

This was the winter castle in military experts' eyes:

「The fortress located at the northernmost tip of the kingdom」

「The shield of the kingdom that blocks the southern route of monsters living in the Blade's Edge Mountains」

「A key point where 50% of the power of the Balahard family is always stationed」

「It is the garrison of the Balahard Rangers, which is also famous in the kingdom, and the headquarters of the Third Legion 」

This was the winter nature for ordinary soldiers:

「The top fortress, where we slay vicious monsters daily.」

「Cold, poor, dangerous, and the worst place to work. 」

「A strange place where only recruits and skilled soldiers exist.」

And this was the winter castle for the nobles:

「Why the Balahard family was granted near-unlimited recruitment rights and numerous other privileges.」

「Why the Balahard family can't grow anymore.」

「It is the biggest weapon of the Balahard family, and its biggest weakness as well.」

Some said it was just a cold and desolate place. For others, it was the easiest place to

get by-products from monster corpses.

However, for the men born and raised in Balahard, the fortress was none of those things.

Their ancestors sacrificed their lives on their fortress. They, too, have a lifelong duty and pride to keep.

For Vincent Balahard, the eldest son of the Balahard family and a promising triple-chain knight, that was what the winter castle meant.

The sacred and noble duty placed on the family by the kingdom.

But it seemed that that pride would soon be contaminated.

The notorious First Prince is coming to this noble land, bringing all sorts of dirty rumors with him.

It was said that he was exiled by His Majesty. Some said he had committed a great sin and went here to hide.

For Vincent, who considered the winter castle as his pride, it was an insult.

The castle is a fortress for warriors who will throw their lives for their sublime convictions.

It was not a place of exile for those who had sinned.

“Why?”

Vincent couldn’t understand.

His father had already stepped away from his stupid nephew. The father that Vincent knew was one who did not overturn what he said.

But now, he heard that his father had overturned his decision.

He even declared his official support for the fool.

When he first heard the news, Vincent couldn’t believe it. He knew his father better.

He considered it as a useless and unfounded myth.

But it wasn't.

The rumors are real.

It was true that his father became the official guardian of the First Prince, and that they were now heading for the castle.

"The soldiers are worried."

"Does the royal family regard our castle as a prison?"

Frontline commanders have expressed their concern over the rumors.

"If the royal family really thinks of Balahard that way, there is no greater insult than this."

"Is this how they repay the dedication and sacrifice Balahard showed?"

"I am concerned that the royal family and the nobles have forgotten the harshness of winter in the warmth of their summer."

Vincent understood their concerns and anger because he felt the same way.

But now is not the time to talk about the presence of uninvited visitors.

Winter is almost here. A harsh season was imminent.

"Check the fortress and strengthen the vigilance. If necessary, additional rangers may be dispatched for patrol. The patrol route and schedule will be left to you."

It wasn't the time yet, but it's better to be safe.

Monsters are unpredictable.

He was alert as he listened to the rangers' reports.

He didn't overlook even the smallest signs, and if he had any suspicion, he immediately sent rangers to check it thoroughly.

It was important to maintain the fortress until his father arrives.

Fortunately, just about the beginning of the full-fledged winter, his father arrived.

However, his father's face was different. His eyes were cold, and his cheeks were stiff.

Even after a few days of fighting, his father didn't look this tired.

It's all because of that stupid guy.

Vincent saw the uninvited visitor.

He looked quite different from what Vincent has heard.

It wasn't possible to properly confirm his figure because his body was wrapped in thick fur, but at least, it wasn't a pig as rumored.

That would also be the Father's doing.

Then, Vincent's eyes narrowed as he saw the First Prince's party.

The shameless Prince brought women with him.

The soldiers on the wall were buzzing.

"Huh, I knew he was going to show up with women."

"One's his maid, one's his lover."

Some spat with anger, saying that the Prince has mistaken the castle as a resort for nobles.

"They are wearing the uniforms of court knights," one noticed, but he was immediately contradicted by the others.

It was known that idle nobles dress their lovers according to their taste.

Vincent frowned at the soldiers' words.

It was really absurd. He was so angry that he couldn't speak.

“Shall we go down, Commander?”

It was only after hearing that from one of his lieutenants that Vincent realized they were still on the wall, looking down on his father rather than meeting him.

He quickly went down and stood before his father.

“I, Vincent Balahard, will finish acting as the commander and return as the Ranger Company Commander!”

He immediately yielded the duties of a commander to his father and gave him a military salute.

“We sincerely welcome your return, Commander!”

“I congratulate you on your hard work. Good job, company commander.”

Once the official takeover was done, his father stepped up and embraced Vincent.

“Good job, Vincent.”

“Thank you for coming back safely, father.”

As he was enjoying the warmth of reuniting with his father, he heard a disgusting voice.

“What, Uncle? You have a son?”

Vincent frowned.

The idiot should only call his father’ uncle’ in private; in public, he must be treated as a high lord and Commander of the Third Legion. The Prince’s tone was without respect.

“Don’t you think I’m old enough to have them?”

Strangely, his father also responded casually.

“Vincent.”

His father glanced at him.

Vincent was forced to endure what he didn't want to do and knelt on one knee.

"Balahard Ranger Company Commander, Balahard family's Vincent, greet the First Prince."

"Oh, nice to see you."

The stupid guy's tone was arrogant. He didn't even tell him to get up. Was he expected to kneel on such a cold floor for a long time?

"Let's go inside," his father said, and he led the Prince and his party to a place where they could rest.

As soon as the two of them were left alone, Vincent asked his father.

"Father, what the hell is going on?"

"It was as you heard. I have decided to become Adrian's guardian, and he will stay with us for the time being."

"But what happened to the days when you criticized his incompetence?"

"People change."

Vincent was confused. It was not clear whether his father had changed, or the first prince had changed.

His father sighed and explained what had happened on the royal road.

"Ha!"

Vincent laughed after hearing all the explanations.

It was a clichéd story. Someone who nearly died lost his memory and became a new person.

However, he couldn't help but believe it because it came from his father.

His father looked out the window for a moment and said.

“There is only one thing I will ask you to do. Watch him without prejudice.”

“I’ve been doing it so far, and it’s not as easy as it sounds…”

Vincent beat his chest and complained of frustration, but his father kept saying it.

Just wait and see. Wait and see what the First Prince is.

* * *

In a war fortress, I was invited to a quiet dinner instead of a grand welcome ceremony.

Niccolo was still stretched out, saying his old muscles needed more rest, so I went to the dinner with Arwen and Adelia.

Uncle seemed to be in the middle of a serious discussion when we arrived.

“How are we going with organizing the attacks to the monster villages?”

“We’ve kept it down steadily, but there are still a few places we haven’t organized an attack for. Now that father is here; I am about to move in earnest.”

“Oh, you’re here,” Uncle noticed. “Come and sit.”

Vincent and the other commanders did not get up from their seats.

I found a spot. Adelia and Arwen settled right next to me.

The commanders’ eyes opened wide when they saw Arwen. Her beauty shone even in the gloomy winter.

“Tsu.”

Uncle clicked his tongue. The commanders got up from their seats and introduced themselves one by one. I gave a rough answer and started eating.

Even as I tried to concentrate on food, I could hear the voices of Uncle and the commanders in my ears.

Some monsters in a village have to be dealt with first, and several troops have to be

dispatched.

Goblins and other familiar names came out countless times in the conversation.

“Then, these will be handled by the Ranger Company…”

Vincent looked hesitant. It was as if he didn’t care about those small monsters, and wanted something else.

“The problem is the Orcs…” he finally managed to say.

My ears stood up at that word. Orcs.

“There’s a small group of orcs settled at the mouth of the mountain range, about twenty of them. They are probably scouting. If we don’t take care of them right away, they could cause problems with the Rangers’ retreat later… with their sizes; it would be difficult for ranger arrows to- Yes, Your Highness?”

Vincent paused as he noticed me stand up and approach Uncle.

Instead of answering, I checked the map that they were looking at.

There were countless small statues of different monsters on the map.

“This.”

I picked up one of the statues.

“Let me take care of it.”

CHAPTER 40
A SONG DEDICATED TO THE BIG, BEAUTIFUL GREEN MASS (2)

Vincent and the commanders wore expressions that showed their fright and opposition to seeing me lift an orc-like statue like it was nothing.

There was a chance that problems would arise with the Rangers' operations if things were to go awry; so, the best course of action was to call the Black Lancers waiting at the garrison to deal with the Orcs.

"Uncle?"

I ignored them and turned my attention to my uncle.

"The Orcs of the Blade's Edge Mountains are no ordinary orcs. Among them, the tough guys alone are enough to knock away even the most skilled soldier's enthusiasm."

I didn't answer. Vincent just looked at my uncle with a still face.

"Vincent, report the size and power of the confirmed Orcs," I ordered.

He stared at me with an unreadable expression on his face and immediately laid out the needed information.

"So far we have confirmed the existence of a maximum of 20 heads," Vincent began, "and the possibility of having Orc Warriors or Orc Shamans thrown into the mix has not been confirmed yet, but the possibility of their existence cannot be ruled out."

"That's right," my uncle said, staring at me. "Are you still confident?"

"Father!"

"Commander!"

There was nothing but silence for a while. That was until it was broken by a shout from the commanders of Winter Castle, my uncle and Vincent included.

“Orc Warrior, Orc Shaman, not a single one of them are easy to face! If it comes to it, you may even have to deal with both!”

“I will bring in the Black Lancers! They would be able to face even twenty Orc Warriors!”

The commanders cheered loudly, confident at the strategy they were brewing.

“If the retreat is blocked, the Rangers may not be able to come back in time! No, maybe you won’t be able to start the operation itself!”

Somehow laughter came out from the words of those who have already made my failures a fact.

“I need about three guides,” I said. Vincent stood and tried to shout, but uncle raised his hand first, signaling him to stop.

“What else do you need?”

“I’ll need to change my knights’ equipment. It looks decent, but it might be too lax. You just have to match it roughly with those from the soldiers of this castle. Oh, and if you have crossbows, lend me some,” I replied.

“That’s not a difficult request,” uncle said considerately.

The leaders of Winter Castle opened their mouths, as if to protest, and glared at uncle and me, alternating between us.

Looking at myself, I felt like a madman searching for an appropriate place to die. And the way uncle looks at me now makes me feel like I am overcome with perplexity over decisions I couldn’t comprehend before.

“Mr. Commander. No, Father!” Vincent jumped up, almost begging for reconsideration.

The price rangers would pay if the operation failed; the political repercussions the Balahard family would face should my security be compromised, and everything else that could go wrong, all seems to weigh heavily on Vincent’s shoulders.

In another world, my words and actions would have been enough to merit applause.

“I will trust and leave it to you,” uncle declared.

Moaning and sighing resonated from all over the council; everyone was terrified of uncle’s words.

I laughed with satisfaction.

Okay, moments like these were why it was worth leaving the royal palace.

* * *

“It’s a movement.”

My harsh words stunned the royal soldiers.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Did you not hear? It’s called mobilization.”

Hans Dek, an officer of the thirtieth infantry sent by the royal family, came before me and asked for an explanation.

“I received a mission to defeat the Orc,” I replied casually, “the number of enemies are twenty, and there may or may not be Orc Warriors or Shamans.”

“Your Highness, we have the Third Legion. Our job is to escort Your Highness.”

“Okay? That’s great. If you want to protect me anyway, you will have to follow me.”

Hans Dek’s eyes dulled at my response.

For many, the situation was difficult to fathom, especially when it came to why the prince was shouting over the Third Legion.

“Okay. The Third Legion will contact you today. Follow along and pick up the equipment, then come and report it to me. Of course, when you come, make sure you’re wearing power equipment.”

I clucked my tongue at Hans Dek and the soldiers who responded reluctantly to my words.

I wanted to send them all back, but I couldn't. These stupid people were the only troops Father ever gave me, and I needed every last man I could get my hands on if I wanted this to succeed.

My real soldiers, whom the king entrusted to me, were a different story.

Not bad.

Although they showed a modest appearance during the blizzard, they were elites carefully selected by the royal family. And their skills in battles were not something one should take lightly. They were, after all, professional soldiers.

Among them, Hans Dek, for example, had a C-class swordsmanship aptitude, possessing characteristics such as [Jesik], [Suseong], and [Infantry Bangjin]. These were honed skills that specialized in group wars.

In addition to that, Hans Dek was also learning archery and various weapon skills. The rest were similar to him.

They were those who could be called fulltime professional soldiers except for one.

I saw the soldier in the back. He was the one whose shoulders I took in a blizzard. He was the only one who did not have any of the characteristics that the other soldiers possessed. Instead, there were the characteristics of [interrogation (探問)] and [disguise (變裝)].

A spy. He must have been sent by the king to watch over any of my actions.

[Joseph].

With his name in my eyes, I woke up.

* * *

Hans Dek and the soldiers abandoned the chain armor characteristic to the royal infantry in favor of leather armor. Covered with unknown fur and cloaks, and armed with swords, small shields and short bows, they looked like they could easily blend in

with the Third Legion.

I left them all along with Arwen under the supervision of the Third Legion's instructor.

For one week until the dispatch, they were asked to familiarize themselves with at least the concept of battle with the Orcs, the mountain march, etc.

Of course, I couldn't expect them to be on the same level as the Third Legion Rangers in that short a time. Not dropping behind and dying on the spot was enough for now.

Anyways, they would have to learn the qualities they lacked through training and practice.

I turned my head and caught Adelia looking at me. Looking at her face, brimming with anxiety, had triggered the characteristic of [heart medicine] again.

"Tsu."

She stroked her head, nervously.

"It's not you, don't worry."

Adelia was excluded from this mission. Although she was a promising Sword Expert, her characteristics were still a problem.

Monsters' methods of killing were different from humans. There is no doubt that Adelia will have an unpleasant reaction on seeing Orcs kill on the battlefield. I don't know which of the [Butcher] and [War Mania] traits would bloom first, but I doubt I'd be pleased with either result.

Still, she wasn't conscious enough to distinguish Pia while her traits were open.

Even if you're lucky enough to survive, your senses will turn to the smell of blood as soon as the first wound is cut and the first body falls.

It was also a problem for her allies to get caught up in it, and an even bigger problem should she run into the mountains and go wild. Losing a genius with an S-class talent on the mountain would not be a very enjoyable experience.

"Niccolo?"

“Marchiadel went out with the commander of the Third Legion this morning.”

Tsu.

Niccolo seemed extra eager to collect data for the book he desperately wanted to complete.

“Your Highness,” Vincent greeted, sounding a bit forced.

He came while I was watching Arwen, and her soldiers followed an instructor from the Third Legion.

“Yes?” was all I could say, a little stunned at his sudden appearance.

From the moment we first met, he didn’t look like someone who had much respect for me. As a result, my tone and attitude were curt.

“Why are you not with His Majesty?” Vincent asked.

But deep inside, I knew that he truly wanted to ask, ‘*why am I here playing around in his castle?*’

“I don’t have to be,” I said, not wanting to explain myself further to him.

Vincent looked at me, condescendingly as a response.

I let it go, not wanting to start a fight.

Since then, Vincent has often visited me. It didn’t seem like he had anything to say. All he did was watch me, carefully waiting for the moment I would let my guard down and expose my weaknesses.

In his eyes, he saw me as a clown, always fooling around.

None of his suspicions were true.

Just as the swan dances gracefully on the water and rolls fiercely under it, so did I.

I was focusing my energy and sharpening my mind and body for the upcoming battle, for the sword built in my heart may not be enough to cut down the orcs.

* * *

The short week of training was over, and it was finally the day before the dispatch.

“Are you the guide?” I asked as a company of five approached.

Vincent and four men came to the gathering to check the operation and announced that they would be together.

“You may not know, but if this operation fails, there are more disruptions than expected,” Vincent said.

“We won’t fail,” I replied.

“You’re so sure…” He replies, his tone full of doubt for me.

I saw Vincent fluttering. The status window was not visible. That meant that Vincent was at least a triple chain knight.

I looked past Vincent and into the people who stood behind him.

I had asked for three guides, but he brought four.

They were as shabby as the Third Legion Rangers, but I knew they weren’t regular Rangers.

Similar to Vincent’s case, I couldn’t see the status window of the first one. The other two were double chain users. But only one was a real ranger. Two double chains, two knights believed to be triple chains or possibly even higher, and a ranger should be useful when we finally deal with the Orcs.

I pretended not to know the strength they kept hidden under their exterior.

The meeting concluded with a rundown of the routes to take and the roles each one had to fulfill. Vincent and his men left, and the only people left were Arwen and my soldiers.

“Well.”

Hans Dek’s expression wasn’t good. The expressions of the other soldiers were similar.

He still looked way too tense for someone about to face powerful monsters.

I did nothing to console them. The first actual battle for any soldier would always be mired with fear. A few light words would never be enough to rid them of this.

Instead, I urged them to go back and rest. The soldiers would surely need all the energy they could muster for the fight that awaits us on the morrow.

* * *

The next day, Hans Dek and his soldiers met again, and their eyes were bleak. No matter how much they pretended, it was obvious that they had not slept last night.

“Tsu.”

This is why I wondered if I would be able to climb the mountain properly.

“I wish you luck,” uncle said. But whether it was to Vincent or me, it wasn’t clear.

“Please come back safely,” Adelia prayed, following us up to the gates before vanishing amidst the crowd.

We were standing on a pure white snowfield.

“You have to walk with as much energy as possible,” reminded the ranger in snowshoes, as he looked back at us.

Arwen, Hans Dek, and the soldiers nodded with sloppy faces.

A ranger named Pilsen was competent enough to be chosen as a guide. He guided us swiftly towards the mouth of the mountain range.

We walked a day and a half before we reached the mouth of the mountain range.

Gulp. I heard someone swallowing loudly, and I couldn’t blame whoever it was.

As I turned my head, I saw the faces of everyone hardened by the expedition. I did not know who swallowed. It might as well have been the same for everyone who froze due to excessive tension.

I let out a long breath.

“If you are tense, your hands and feet harden and they become dull,” Vincent popped in and gave me some advice, “so please calm your mind.”

It was ridiculous.

I wasn’t nervous at all. But somehow, Vincent had the impression I was. I feel better now than ever. I could even hum.

The energy of the monsters in the mountain range was driving me crazy. But I held back my excitement and motioned to the Ranger Pilsen. Noticing my signal, Pilsen began to move forward.

Sniff. His nose was wide open, taking in the cold and frozen air of the mountains.

I did the same, and before long, a faint but foul odor caught my attention.

It was dirty and disgusting, but oddly, it was also the one I missed.

It was the unique smell of an Orc—of a battle waiting to happen.

I drew my sword, Arwen followed with hers. Soldiers, including Hans Dek, took out crossbows and bows.

The ranger, who was looking down the lighthouse from the front, beckoned to us.

With silent footsteps, I leaned down next to the ranger and looked down.

There were Orcs there; creatures with their heads inside the corpse of a giant reindeer, and Aguagudae.

They were horrible monsters who clamored while holding the ends of the bright red guts of their victim; monsters, who ate the flesh of a reindeer that fell on the floor.

It was the ugliest and most primitive of sights.

Tuk.

Vincent struck my shoulder.

Instead of answering him, I quietly raised my hand.

Without disturbing the monsters below, we quickly ran through everyone's role. Those with bows and crossbows prepared their arrows.

But before we could launch a sneak attack, a foreign noise leaked out. At that moment, Orcs stopped quarreling and tuned in their primal instincts to any danger that might be lurking nearby.

Crere.

The Orcs were looking around with an uncomfortable sound. One of them raised its head towards the castle.

It smeared bright red blood on its chin and looked around with blood-red eyes. Its flesh was colored differently than the other Orcs.

It was an Orc Warrior.

The Orc Warrior pinned its gaze at me. Its appearance was so heinous that ordinary humans would be paralyzed just by meeting its gaze.

Hello, long time no see. It had been such a long time since I was faced with the thrill of battle.

I laughed happily.

A light beam exploded from the eyes of the Orc Warrior.

"Ah ah ah ah!"

The Orc Warrior roared.

"Shoot."

I got up from my seat and caught it.

The longing of four hundred years that had been suppressed since entering the mountain range, was released at that moment.

CHAPTER 41
A SONG DEDICATED TO THE BIG, BEAUTIFUL GREEN MASS (3)

The Orc Warrior had his arms, which were thicker than his arms, covering his face. An arrow struck into his one arm then, an arrow which he casually pulled out without showing any signs of pain. His face had a murderous cast to it, and he gave a great boisterous roar. I was watched by this Orc Warrior as I descended the slope. He grabbed his ax and charged at me with thundering footsteps. He took a misstep, though, and smacked into the ground with a satisfying thud, blood flowing from where he had hit his head.

I laughed at his poor display, and I knew that I could not have asked for something more fun than this. After righting himself he charged at me once more. When within distance, he swung his ax at me in a downward arc. I used my momentum and rolled in under his swing, feeling the displaced air at the near-miss. My entire head shivered as my brain registered how close it had come to departing from its body. I sprang up and put some distance between myself and the Orc Warrior, drawing twilight. My entire body was filled with ecstasy as adrenaline rushed through it. Once more I dodged, this time making a clean cut into the Orc Warrior's midsection.

I could hear him raw his pain, though I had already swiveled around to face the Orc who now stood in front of me. Smaller and not as fierce as the Orc Warrior, it could still singe-handedly rip a man apart with its bare hands. As he rushed at me, I held Twilight in a horizontal two-handed grip before me. I time my trap perfectly. When he swung at me with his own blade, I twisted Twilight at an angle and cut into the Orcs empty hand, severing his fingers. He managed to block my next swing, though I deftly launched another that scraped over his shoulder and cut into his neck. Blood spurted from the gaping wound in a sickening gurgle as I wrenched my blade free, having cut through muscle and sinew.

A soft sigh escaped from the Orc's lips as his eyes fluttered in confusion, his nostrils flaring as he snorted the fishy smell of his own blood.

I gave a chuckle upon smelling the fragrant scent. Why does the smell of blood excite

me so?

Energy flowed throughout my body. I hadn't even activated my mana heart and still, I was filled with vitality. In that instant, I heard something rush at me, and I instinctively dodged. An axe slammed into the Orc's chest as he was thrown back. I swiveled around, seeing that the Orc Warrior had thrown the weapon. The bloody Orc Warrior sprang into a last desperate charge, roaring his anger, his face taking on the mien of some grotesque carving of a gargoyle. Suddenly, a hail of arrows flew through the air and thudded into him. He gave a pained bellow as his torso sprouted crimson roses of blood and viscera where the arrow had slammed into him

"Charge!" came the order as Arwen, her weeping blade in hand, rushed down the slope. Royal infantrymen, armed with blade and shield, rushed after her.

"You're late," I stated as she reached me.

"Your Majesty, you were too fast!" she near shouted at me, her voice filled with a passion that I've never heard from her before. The Orc Warrior, not yet put out of its misery, continued to whimper in pain.

'The day was sunny, and yet the smell of blood lingers everywhere.'

'The body is light, and the master's wielded sword is sharp.'

"This feels so good."

It felt like my body was floating as many pleasant sensations entered it.

"Your Majesty!" shouted Arwen as she ripped me from my elated stupor. I saw the Orcs spreading out, their intention of surrounding me quite clear. Arwen was prepared to rush at them.

"Do not enter the fray! They will overwhelm you!" I commanded her.

I readied Twilight as I racked my brain for any tidbit of knowledge that would aid me, for I had existed for more than four centuries and ken of war and its in and outs was considerable. Back then, Orcs had not been mere crude monsters, no, they had ruled over a stately continent. In those ages, the ages when I had been an enchanted sword, war was waged every moment of every day. A song came to my lips, a song of a monster hunter that had not left his name to posterity.

“I piled up green carcasses, raising myself a mountain!

Red streams flowed from it, as bloody nails.”

This was the song of a poor man who had despised Orcs. It was not a song dealing with myths or heroics. No, it was a song about a son who had lost his father, a son who had then become a force of vengeance as he hunted the beasts down. It was [Poetry of Revenge].

This sorrowful song flowed through the air, not a single verse missing a beat.

[Aaaah! Aaaah!]

Twilight wailed within my mind as it took in the sorrow of the words. My sword knew that death was soon approaching, and as a mastercraft sword, it would be the harbinger of these deaths. I rolled as an ax swung at me, and then slashed into its exposed underbelly. Twilight wailed as it added another life to its kill tally.

* * *

The following record of the battle was recounted by a recruit of the royal infantry:

My mouth was dry and my insides ached. My vocal cords were being stretched to their very limit. I heard a voice complaining that he had no decent weapon to fight with. It was the voice of Joseph, and I could hear the anxiety in his tone as he saw the battle escalate, as he smelled the stench of spilled guts and flowing blood. He had been exiled here by the royal court, and resented them for it.

“Charge!”

The order was given and my company rushed into the fray. I was caught by surprise, almost stumbling down the slope as I held my sword and shield before me. I shouted the battle cry along with my comrades, yet their presence brought little relief to me. I knew that, in my case at least, such courage was a momentary phenomenon.

The greater physical strength of the Orcs soon became apparent as the infantry finally closed with their number. The things had heinous, leering face, and on average they stretched two heads taller than our tallest men. At that moment a great terror came over me as these muscular, dark green bodies launched themselves at us. My legs wavered, and I wanted to turn tail and run away.

Flight was not an option, however, for I stood at the front of our ranks. I looked to the soldier at my side as he gave a strained scream.

It was Hans Dek. He nodded at me when our eyes met. “We are the royal sword!” he proclaimed, seeking to bolster the men’s courage.

Soon his chant was taken up by more soldiers.

“We are the royal shield!” their voices came loudly and proudly. Joseph still seemed afraid, however, convinced that the damned prince had led everyone to a grisly death.

“We are the Leonberger royal infantry!” the next verse of the chant was shouted, managing to blot out the near-deafening roar of the Orcs.

“We shall claim glory for the line of Leonberger! Protect the Prince!”

There was little sign of the scared soldiers who had at first rushed the foe, nor were they now courageous. No, they hacked away at the monsters with a reckless abandon. A few did however try to desert the battle, but they were soon battered back into line by those behind them.

“Surge forward! There are no cowardly curs in the royal infantry! Fight like men!”

The Orcs renewed their assault and suddenly the royal infantry brought their shields up, forming a wall of iron. At that instant I came face to face with the blazing red eyes of an Orc, and so great was my terror that I felt a warm dampness spread across my legs as I emptied my bladder. Suddenly, I was pulled back by a pair of big hands.

“Fuck, get back from the line, recruit!” a soldier shouted as he took up my former position. A sense of relief washed over me as my heart still beat furiously within my ribcage, yet this relief soon abated when I realized that I was in the chaotic push and pull of armored infantry, with no avenue of escape existing. One misstep and I would be trampled to death. Our line inched forward at a glacial pace.

“First line, shields! Second line, javelins!”

These orders were followed to the letter as the front line crouched down to protect the soldiers behind them. An Orc cam crashing into that line, his ax cleaving through the shield of the soldier in front of me, coming to rest in his jugular as he gurgle sickeningly and fell forward.

“Throw!” cam the order, and as one the second line of infantry thrust their javelins into the Orcs, the missiles gliding past fallen and hale soldiers to thud into their targets. I thrust my own javelin, which neatly entered the skull of a ravening Orcs. Once more I was on the front line, and the soldiers with me each hacked away with their swords once more. My arms felt strange as I struck at the foe, as if I was trying to cut a slab of frozen meat with a blunt knife.

I stabbed my blade into the armpit of Orc, who glared balefully at me as he gripped the blade with his other hand. I wished to release the blade then and there to fall back into the second line, but hands did not obey my brain as both me and my foe clutched the blade. It was then that the Orc’s eyes grew wide with terror as blue light slammed into his chest, ending his life.

The soldiers took heart at this display of sorcery and the commander charged in front of his men, vaulting over a few Orcs and cutting away the tendons of their legs as he landed behind them. All the soldiers, even those wounded upon the ground, took heart at this display and renewed their assault. Some of them jumped onto the heaps of Orc corpses, hacking down ate the beasts from this advantageous, though grisly, elevation. The soldiers were there for each other, and if one of them was unable to fell a particularity nasty Orc, they came at it in numbers of two to then at a time, the great beasts not able to mount a defense under such a tempest of blades. Vincent had been the one to leap over the Orcs and slice behind their knees, he had been the one to carry the battle.

I was excited by his display, my heart not once abating its rapid beating within my breast, yet now it was courage and not fear that made it pound so. I joined the voices of the other shoulders as they shouted their battle-lust. The celebration was premature, however. Many Orcs had been slain, yet for every one that had been felled, three human lives were lost. Only five of the things remained against thirty of our soldiers. Yet, the flame of courage that burned within my breast was soon smothered as I felt a terrible cold descend over the field of slaughter. Twice as many Orcs as we had just slain now appeared on the rise, charging down at us with their barbaric battle lust plain to see, their teeth bared in vicious animal snarls.

I closed my eyes tightly, knowing that I was but a cowardly cub that played at war. I was awaiting death, yet I did not hear the thumping footfalls that was to herald our end. Instead, many screams made in utmost pain slammed into my ears. It sounded much like so many pigs being slaughtered within an abattoir. I opened my eyes and the first thing I saw was Orcs flying through the sky like ugly, green bloated birds. Their

bodies had been torn apart and their limbs and viscera rained down onto the ground in a grisly rain. Their blood and meaty bits covered our armor much like the grisly souvenirs sported by more barbaric peoples.

Through the red mist, Prince Adrian could be seen, his eyes still glowing with the fearful blue energy he had unleashed to decimate the Orcs.

CHAPTER 42
A SONG DEDICATED TO THE BIG, BEAUTIFUL GREEN MASS (4)

The prince jumped down from a pile of corpses and drew his sword as he came out of his combat roll. In this single movement, he had cut into the waist of an Orc Warrior, blood gushing from the wound. The Orc attempted to grapple the prince with its arm, yet Adrian had already moved past him towards the thick of the battle.

The blow had been true, and its timing well-judged. Had Adrian cut too deeply into the Orc's gut, his sword would have stuck fast, and the beast's hand would have pulped his head like an overripe melon. Vincent watched as the prince's sword clashed with that of an Orc.

"Impressive," he muttered as Adrian's sword danced into the Orc's armpit, pulled back, and slashed at its exposed throat. The beast threw its hands over the wounds as its lifeblood spurted out.

The prince's display of swordsmanship had not a whiff of mana to it, and the style of itself was beautiful and terrifying all at once.

Another show of his skill as the prince blocked an ax that had been thrown at his exposed back, the weapon clattering to the ground.

At that moment, the royal infantry fired their arrows into the mass of Orcs, took up their swords and shields, and charged down the slope to close with the foe. The Orcs diverted their force, some charging at the soldiers and others thirsting rather for Adrian's blood.

* * *

I watched as many of the Orcs chose to fight me and me alone.

"I know much of the ways of war, yet my experience at wielding a weapon is far less than my experience of being one," I muttered under my breath as I observed their

approach. I guessed that facing so many foes was a good thing, as it would force me to give my utter best in the battle. How wrong I was.

* * *

Vincent flicked a hand at Pilsen, who stood next to him. Pilsen whistled, and with this signal, Rangers and knights appeared on the slopes that stretched toward the battlefield from both sides. These were the troops of the Third Legion, who had followed the prince's own force as a secret contingency made by Count Bale Balahard.

"When I give the signal, fire into the Orc's to ensure the prince's safety," Vincent commanded, though he held no intention of ending the show too soon. The royal infantrymen were doing better than he had expected, their skill in battle greater than he had at first assumed.

He had looked at them as decorative knights, yet it seemed that they had a proper grasp of tactics and were consummate swordsmen. While considering the field of battle, Vincent noticed the prince vault into the air. He clucked his tongue, expecting the green-beard prince to be overwhelmed by the chaos of a real battle at any moment. He raised his hands, signaling for the Rangers to ready their crossbows. Knights had drawn their swords, and their bodies were taut as they expected to rush into battle at any moment.

Vincent knew he just had to lower his hand to end this farce of a skirmish, yet he could not bring himself to do so as he studied Adrian.

"How does he fight so well?" Vincent asked to no one in particular. Adrian had just severed both the arms of an Orc Warrior. Two more Orcs rushed at him, and these were felled in swift succession. In the next graceful movement by the prince, he sliced his blade in a wide arc, cleaving four Orcs in twain.

"Commander," came Pilsen's voice as he drew Vincent's attention away from the battle with a tap upon his shoulder. The man pointed toward the northern foothills of the mountain.

"Oh shit," Vincent cursed as he jumped onto a boulder. An entire Orc battle unit was moving toward them, their banner fluttering in the wind. Vincent gave new orders to his men, his rangers losing a rain of bolts at this new threat.

"First platoon, remain here as a reserve force, aiding those below once their lines

become strained. The rest of you, with me!" The Count's son ordered as he joined his troops who were marching to face the Orcish reinforcements.

"Fuck, that's their combat troops. Why are they here?"

At times, the combat troops did indeed move with the scouts, especially if they were looking to hunt larger prey. It was unheard of, however, for more than one hundred orcs, both Warriors and Scouts, to hunt a measly group of thirty humans. Vincent had no choice, the enemy had appeared, and he had to face them. He had only five platoons of rangers and seven knights—and-fifty-seven men against a hundred Orcs. The numbers were surely not in his favor. Ten giant Orc Warriors ambushed his men from one side, and Vincent started drawing power as he rotated his three rings.

"Knights, deal with the Orc Warriors! Rangers, kill every fucking Orc you lay eyes on!"

The Rangers who had made their descent down the slope halted to reload their crossbows. As one they fired, fifty bolts slamming into the charging ranks of Orcs. Just before closing with the Orc Warriors, Vincent gave one last glance at Adrian.

The prince's battle was nearing an end, not many Orcs still standing to face him. It would surely soon be over. Hearing the great battle roar of the Orc Warriors, he wrenched his attention away from the prince. As one the beasts sprinted towards him, Vincent let the mana flow into his blade.

* * *

The royal infantry had fielded a mindless, almost berserk defense. The Rangers who had rushed in to aid them came to a halt as they saw the prince slice into the Orcs.

"Fire!" Their platoon commander ordered as they loosed their bolts at any Orcs who still stood. They then continued their descent of the slope. They could see the disgusting green tide of the Orc army rush their position as the beasts blew their horns, their banners flapping in the wind.

"Ignore the second wave!" Arwen shouted at the infantry. "Our mission is to guard His Majesty the Prince! Leave those Orcs to the Third Legion!"

Her command only brought stupefied and confused expressions to the soldier's faces, and she did not understand this reaction. As she readied her sword, she saw the prince blasting into the enemy with a sapphire beam of pure light. The corpses of Orcs

exploded into the air, their only survivors being an Orc Warrior who had lost his arms and a scant few regular Orcs who were still hale. Amid all the chaos, Adrian raged on as he showcased his ferocious skill, requiring aid from none.

Adrian paused to catch his breath, the coruscating, blue glow of mana fading from his body. For the first time during the battle, Arwen stared into his bared face, which was devoid of any expression. It almost seemed as if his soul had escaped his body.

“Are you well, Your Majesty?” she shouted at him. Upon receiving no answer, she rushed toward him. She reeled to a stop halfway there, though, for she noticed the look in his eyes. Adrian’s eyes were empty and filled with bottomless grief. She saw a terrible, almost ancient sense of loss within those eyes.

The prince opened his mouth, his eyes still dead. She heard him whisper something in a cracked and sunken voice. At that moment, the great and terrible roar of Orcish battle horns washed over them. Adrian’s head was tilted at an odd angle, and a deep blue light sparked and then faded in his eyes. He tightened the grip on his sword and broke into a sprint, heading directly at the hundreds of charging ravenous Orcs.

“Your Majesty! Stop!” Arwen screamed as she saw what he was doing. He paid her no heed.

“Move out, and stay frosty!” she ordered the surviving infantry. “Hans Dek, you are in command,” she fired off as she rushed after the prince.

* * *

I wandered across endless plains for what felt like an eternity. I only came to a halt when my eyes sighted accursed green-skins, who had chosen to interrupt my solitary journey.I cared not for their number, or their brutish lusts and intentions.

No, if I sighted one of the abominations, I ended it. If I heard one, I tracked it until its blood stained my blade.

Now, there I was: Tearing into the most recent one foolish enough to approach me. Into its flesh, I cleaved, drinking deeply from the vile rivers of blood that flowed from its many wounds.

I chewed its flesh until my hunger was sated. Yet, never did my stomach remain full for long and swiftly came the time when I sought to feed once more. Yes, my hunger

never truly left me; it was that severe. No matter how many of these beasts I destroyed, no matter how deep the rivers of blood flowed: Never was it enough.

Not once in my endless travels across that barren Orcish realm did my longing subside. Even my constant tally of victories brought me no sense of elation or even achievement.

My hunger and my bereavement were like an endless abyssal pit down which poison was poured. No matter the many torrents of blood and poison I let flow into that pit, no matter… No, the hungry beast within it never died and was never sated.

Indeed, I wandered that barren land in my accursed search for blood and battle. As time went by, wounds came to my body, and these became scars. My skin was ravaged and flayed, my bones shattered. Every step I took was an exercise in pain, yet I could not stop wandering.

I recalled memories of my wife and a daughter. Yet, at the ceremony… yes, she was killed, her flesh never found. So I battled, I fought, again and again, day after day.

My heart of mana had been depleted so many ages ago, yet, my blade still shone with a glint of light that banished the darkness around me.

Indeed, the powers that were sapping my life-force were the very things ensuring my survival. In each and every battle, I grew older, my lustrous dark hair fading to a lifeless white. My fair, blood-drenched skin wrinkled until I looked like a haggard beggar.

I marched on, my hideous body not once faltering on its never-ending trudge through desolation.

Once more, I met a force of green-skins, and for the first time since I have entered this desolate wasteland, I spoke:

“Alas… Alas.”

It was more of a sobbing groan that escaped from my withered lips than any coherent word. These beasts carried a banner, and upon that banner, there was a phrase spelled out in their crude language. It was a phrase that told me that here was the foe I had been seeking for all these eons, the foe that had taken my love from me.

I cried out like a wounded and cornered beast then, a cry that held great fury. I held my withered arm before me, the arm of a hundred-year-old man. Even with this

wrinkled and withered appendage, I still clutched my sword.

I charged at my nemesis.

The first green-skin to face me lost its head, and so did the second. As their necks spurted blood, my sword was already raised before me once more.

An abnormally large green-skin swung its great rusted ax at me. I made no attempt to dodge, my blade glowing with power as it blocked his foul weapon, and wrenched it to the side. I readied myself to deliver the killing blow, yet the energy within my blade petered out, and once more, I was naught but a century-old husk of a man.

The attacks that the great green-skin now launched at me could not be fended off by a being as elderly and decrepit as I. The beast had regained his weapon, and this time it was my sword that clattered to the earth as my arm gave in under his frenzied assault.

His battle-ax slammed into my chest, cutting into my flesh and fracturing some ribs. The last image that flashed through my mind was my wound and the fact that not a single drop of blood flowed from my desiccated corpse.

I awoke, and my arm was limp and shattered at my side, yet I felt no pain. The day that my wife had died, my soul had gone with her into the realm of death. My life had long ago been forfeit, and wounds done to my limbs and chest were mere trifles when weighed against the reality of my damnation.

“Kruhuhu, kruhuhuhuhuhu,” the damnable green-skin laughed as it shoved its finger into the gaping mess that was my torso.

It ground its digit into my wound, causing me to fall back as the pain finally invaded my consciousness. I shook my head as if to clear the fevered dream that I so sorely hoped this was. The green-skin looked at me in silence and then stomped on me with its heavy foot, breaking my sternum as my chest caved in under its might.

* * *

The withered old man stretched his hand out at the Orc, who still stood upon him. I watched then as his fingertips started to become like dust; I watched as his entire body quickly faded into nothingness. As he disappeared, he held a small smile upon his cracked lips, and it seemed that he wished to say something. Yet, the dissolution of his

body soon claimed his head as well, and soon, nothing of him remained.

That man, whose life had been marked by his burning lust for vengeance, had disappeared from the desolate plain. Where to, no one knew.

His end under that Orc was a story that was never beheld, and so none could ever recount it.

I am the only one who recalls his ceaseless wanderings and his eventual demise… I alone remember, after all these centuries, I remember.

* * *

There was something mushy and squishy under me. I finally opened my eyes and twisted my head to study it, seeing that it was a bloodied and wounded Orc, and I was practically face-to-face with it. Its face was distorted into a demonic scowl, and it was trying to form some words in a weakened voice as blood dribbled down its chin. Suddenly, its hand shot out and grabbed my ankle as it snarled, showing off its sharp cuspids. A blade flashed and cleaved right through the beast's neck, its head rolling some distance. Blood spurted from the open wound, the warm liquid spattering onto me. I was amazed more than horrified at the sensation.

"Die, you abomination!"

"Waaagh! No, you die, man-thing!"

Within a second, my world exploded into a chaotic maelstrom of sound, where before silence had reigned. The sound of stomping feet and the clash of weapons. The agonizing wails from the wounded and the dying. Such things forced themselves into my auditory canals all at once.

It was only then that the realization fully came to me: I was upon a field of battle. Once I knew where I was, I started to consider the memory of the suffering old man in a more objective fashion, for it was indeed my memory, as he had wielded me upon his quest for vengeance.

I knew what I had to do. I had to finish [Poetry of Revenge], I had to honor his quest. I then noticed an elite Orc combat unit, much like the one my former wielder had faced moments before his death. The banner was different, yet, this mattered little to me. I readied my sword and started to sing the poem, the mana within me intermingling

with the words.

“I piled up green carcasses, raising myself a mountain!

Red streams flowed from it, as bloody nails.”

Blood spattered, and bodies toppled as I flew at the Orcs like an avenging angel of death. I wandered from one side of the battle to the other, my blade drenched in their lifeblood.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty!” Sounded a clear, high-pitched voice from somewhere not in my immediate vicinity. It was Arwen, and I tried to determine her position. It was then that I realized all the Orcs were dead, all except the one I now stood upon with my left leg. The thing beneath me struggled to get free, though in vain, for Twilight pierced his heart soon enough, and he grew still.

『A new verse has been added to [Poetry of Revenge].』

As I saw this message, I knew what this verse was. I whispered it under my breath.

“I piled up green carcasses, raising myself a mountain!

Red streams flowed from it, as bloody nails.

I honor your soul before this mountain of mine!”

『[Poetry of Revenge] has become [Poetry of True Soul].』

It was at that very moment that the forgotten man’s name came to my mind. My gaze roved over the battlefield, finally seeing a man with a bloodied cloak who held the tattered battle banner of the Orcs.

“The Orcs are annihilated! The day is ours!” Shouted Vincent, eldest son of the Count Balahard, and the namesake of the ill-fated avenger who had once wielded me.

I knew what that age-old Vincent’s last words were, even if he had not spoken them. I nervously wet my lips as I repeated the words, softly, over and over again, all the while looking at the young Balahard:

“I shall return in the next life.”

CHAPTER 43
A SONG DEDICATED TO THE BIG, BEAUTIFUL GREEN MASS (5)

“Your Majesty,” Arwen said as she approached me, her body coated in blood and the stench of grimy sweat emanating from her. Her disheveled appearance was a far cry from her accustomed regal bearing. Despite this, she shone with elated joy.

“Thank you for ensuring our survival, for you had fought like an enraged dragon,” she continued as she thumped her fist onto her breast, honoring me with such a martial salute. The royal infantry had also taken up their formation, presenting themselves before me. The awe in which they regarded me was plain for all to see.

“We honor the Prince and his draconic mastery of war!” they gaily shouted as one man. The blood upon their blades, the dents in their armor, and their shattered shields stood as a testament of the battle they had waged in my name.

My body still ached, and my mind still reeled, yet I also shared their joy at our victory. “You have done well Arwen,” I said to her, then turning to the soldiers ranked before me. “So have you, men, you have shown your mettle and valor upon the field of battle on this day.”

Arwen and her soldiers stomped the earth and once more brought their fists thumping into their breasts. I singled Hans Dek out from their lines. “Tend to the injured, I have other duties to return to,” I ordered the man.

“Your Majesty, it shall be done,” he affirmed my command. While addressing the troops, Vincent had made his way toward me. In his hands, he held the tattered banner that the Orcs had sported. “Why do you carry this?” I asked him. He did not deign to answer me; different emotions were warring upon his face as he stretched out the silence. I could clearly see that he was plunged into a deep confusion as to how to regard me. Then, he offered the banner me. I wondered at his intentions, not yet accepting his offering.

“It is the tradition of the Third Legion that the soldier who had fought most valiantly

claim the banner of the enemy. It is the most valued loot of battle, and a testament of our honorable victory. It is yours," he finally said. I made to turn away from his proffered gift, yet he swiftly reached forward and placed the banner within my grasp. It was at that moment that I took in the warm regard with which Vincent and his Rangers and knights considered me. Their awe matched that of Arwen and the royal infantry.

The entire scene excited me as my heart once more started to beat within my chest. Although I held some discomfort at all the attention that was being heaped upon me, I felt more welcomed by these warriors than ever before. Vincent nodded at me as he saw the understanding bloom upon my countenance.

"Victory is ours," I mumbled.

"Your Majesty, speak it louder, so that they can hear the words," said Vincent.

"Victory is ours!" I shouted as Vincent grasped my hand and thrust it into the air with his. The Rangers, knights, and infantrymen raised their swords to the sky as one and took up my call:

"Victory is ours!" their voices rang out into the cold air.

Upon hearing their affirmation of my own cheer, my heart grew warm. This was an uncomfortable yet amazing feeling, one that that I had never felt before.

"Victory is ours!" I shouted once more, affirming the feeling that had crept into my breast.

"Hurrah for the First Prince! Winter Castle salutes and welcomes His Majesty!"

At that moment, the realization struck me: When I had been a sword, my deepest desire had been to claim my own glory, to be lauded for victories won by my own hands. How would such glory feel if it was mine and mine alone, not that of my wielder? I have imagined and longed for such things through all those ages, and here I know stood: My desire fulfilled. It was an indescribable feeling, the awe in which I was held.

"Victory is ours!" the words once more rang from my lips. Sometime in the future, I might look back at this moment, even feeling embarrassed at the way I had carried on. I would probably be embarrassed. But right then, all that mattered was the present. I only wished to savor our victory and drink up the cheers of men who celebrated my glory. I even went as far as to proclaim myself the master of the righteous military

might of our kingdom.

“Sixteen,” came the single word from Vincent, cutting into my reverie.

“What are you on about?” I asked him.

“You have slain sixteen Orcs, Prince Adrian,” he said, trying hard to keep his face impassive. “I have also slain sixteen of the beasts today,” he finally added, failing to hide his smug expression and tone of voice.

“This remains mine!” I shouted, lifting the banner for all to see as he averted his gaze. The feeling of victory remained untarnished within me.

* * *

It would be an understatement to call the Third Legion’s work ethic effective. They removed their bolts from Orcish flesh in record time, also gathering the arms and armor of their fallen comrades. The corpses of man and Orc alike were thrown upon a great pile and turned into a blazing pyre. The legion was economical even in their mourning, for they did not tarry long before the ashes that had once been their comrades in arms blew away on the mountain breeze.

“We head back for the castle,” Vincent commanded. About thirty or so Rangers yet lived to follow his order. “Let’s go as well,” I instructed Arwen, who commanded the infantry to march after Vincent.

I glanced one last time at the field of battle. Swirling wisps of smoke rose from the pure white snow, seemingly connecting it to the blue sky above. I considered this scene vacantly for a moment, and then turned away.

It was indeed time to return to Winter Castle.

* * *

During our descent of the mountain, other Rangers joined our ranks. These had been the men sent to eradicate the small village of monsters. I could see that Vincent had received some form of troubling news from them, for his mood had darkened upon their joining us. I did not ask what troubled him so.

“The Rangers had failed to detect the movement of that Orc combat unit,” he finally

said as he shared his worries with me. Either there had been a breach in the Ranger's usual perimeter, or the Orcs had devised some method to avoid detection. Neither possibility was comforting, and Vincent was deeply concerned.

"We have to hurry back," he said as he quickened the pace of our march.

Upon our return to Winter Castle, my Uncle met us at the gates. The soldiers upon the walls cheered our return, and upon hearing this renewed martial spirit, I raised the banner to the sky.

"I am the holder of this banner!" I shouted, in the vein of my earlier celebrations.

Arwen shook her head at my words, and Vincent merely looked bored. I could see that those who had fought by my side were also not impressed. It seemed that I had milked my pride for all it had been worth, but hey, I haven't had many chances in my long existence to feel that way about myself.

The soldiers upon the walls were more surprised by my display as they saw the flag I held, for they had expected a knight of the Third Legion to hold such a trophy. Nevertheless, they cheered at me with enthusiasm. The pride that had slowly flowed out of me on our journey back now once more thudded within my breast.

"Okay, let's get to the business at hand. Has there been any suspicious movements by the Orcs on the mountain?" my Uncle Balahard asked.

"An entire combat unit had been ghosting their scouting force, a combat unit that should by all rights have been further up," Vincent gave his report. "Something unexpected must have occurred in the mountain range," the Count decided.

Hearing the serious nature of their discourse, I slowly lowered the banner that I had lofted into the air.

"I will not be discourteous and keep you men from your rest after battle, though I have some serious matters to discuss with you, son. Follow me."

Vincent walked after the Count, then suddenly turned back to me.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," he said, looking embarrassed as he immediately walked on once more.

“Don’t you think he’s a little weird?” Arwen asked as she watched his retreating back. He seemed fine to me, even if he was a bit boastful of his pride in a childish manner. “Well, for a tough man like him to suddenly change the way he acts towards you must be embarrassing,” she added with a smile.

“Adrian!” Adelia called to me as she came from the keep. I quickened my pace to meet her. “I’m glad that you’ve come back safely,” she told me as we finally faced one another, noticing her warm and welcoming regard. It was only then that I fully realized that the battle was over. I gave a hearty laugh upon noticing her hospitable manner.

“Do you know what this is?” I asked as I showed her the banner I had won.

* * *

A whopping third of the Rangers that had battled with us had been slain. Vincent had said that, against such an elite force of Orcs, these casualties were acceptable. Even to my ancient ears, his words had sounded harsh. I shared my opinion with Arwen, asking why the men of Balahard had not mourned their dead to a greater extent.

“To gain victory is enough to honor our fallen. We Balahards comfort the souls of the fallen by spilling the blood of Orcs,” Vincent answered me as he stepped into the room. Upon hearing his words, my mind once more returned to the memory of the avenger that had once wielded me. Vincent’s philosophy had echoed that of his namesake, and I could not see this as a coincidence. I looked at Vincent, thoughts of reincarnation swirling through my mind.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked as he noticed my expression. I did not answer him, and in due order, he informed me as to the particulars of Winter Castle’s latest strategic meeting.

“Why are you telling me all these things?” I finally blurted out.

“His Excellency the Count had ordered me to keep you up to date,” came his reply.

I nodded. My Uncle, and therefore my mother, the Queen, wished for me to get along with Vincent. This would not be a difficult thing for me to do, as he did not possess a stuck-up personality.

“I will leave you to your rest,” he said after some time. Arwen had woken Adelia up, and both of them also left my chambers. I was on my own, then, sitting in a chair as I

immersed myself within my thoughts.

The lingering echoes of [Poetry of Revenge] were still in my mind. I had become immersed in its power, especially after a new verse had been added. It did not yet feel like my own song, for another had composed it. I knew that I had to craft such poems into extensions of my being, rather than considering them as mere songs to be sung. This had been done to some extent when [Poetry of Revenge] had become [Poetry of True Soul]

'Tap.'

I was stirred from my musings by an unexpected sound.

'Tap tap tap.'

Darkness had settled onto the world outside my window, yet within it, I saw a stark white bird with an elongated beak that sat upon my window sill. It was clear to me that this was no ordinary bird, for what bird cackled with the laughter of a tongue torn from the mouth of a human?

CHAPTER 44
SUDDENLY, A SEVERE WINTER WAS COMING (1)

Tok Tok. Tok Tok.

Pecking the glass with its beak, the bird took a step back. It seemed as if it was gesturing for me to open the window.

Even though I felt quite lazy and not all inclined to do so, I finally opened it, for I had a nagging suspicion about who had sent this weird bird.

With the window opened, the bird flew into my chamber, perching itself on the edge of a chair. It stared at me with its beady eyes and opened its beak.

[Did you like the gift I sent?]

The fresh and melodic voice that penetrated my mind was that of a person very familiar to me. This damned bird was a messenger from that filthy elder high elf.

“What gift?”

As it spoke in her voice, Sigrun’s messenger turned its gaze towards an Orcish weapon I had claimed as battle-loot.

Only then did I comprehend what gift she had bestowed upon me. I frowned in disgust at the bird.

“So, it was your doing.”

[I merely wished for Your Majesty to face a greater challenge.]

“It doesn’t matter. I find it abominable that you drove a hundred fierce Orcs onto the battlefield, and left hundreds to die at the end!”

[I implore Your Majesty, I wish for you to be pleased with my heart through this.]

Her voice was so much like that of a young child, whispering in its search for praise. In it, there was no sign of mourning nor sorrow for the dozens of Rangers who had died while fighting.

I was reminded of why I was not too fond of elves, for I knew better than anyone how their favors worked. However, there was another reason why any interest shown by elves was even more terrible. It was because they were severe voyeurs.

[Such hatred towards the entire Greenskin clan… I'm very impressed.]

Sigrun had evidently been watching me from somewhere.

Perhaps she had borrowed a bird's eye as she was doing now, or maybe another beast's eyes. Worse, she could have been watching me with my own eyes.

Either way, it wasn't a pleasant feeling. It felt horrifying to find out that a thousand-year-old maniacal elf was skulking about, spying on me.

My head was throbbing. I rubbed my scorching temple furiously. There was nothing more useless than getting angry at Elves. They never understood or sympathized with other people's anger, seeming to enjoy it greatly whenever someone grew mad at their actions.

"Don't talk any more nonsense. Just tell me why you've come."

[Why must you be so cold?]

Looking at the bird with its head bowed as if it were grinning, my face grew stiff.

[I'm a little bit hurt by your harshness, but what else can I do? Since it's quite obvious that my feelings are currently unrequited, I'll just wait for the day where you'll return my feelings.]

She could wait forever for all I cared. Such a day would never come.

"Hah… Hahahaha!"

As I laughed, the bird stared once more at me and opened its mouth.

[There is something I need to tell you about, deep within the mountain range.]

I didn't answer. I did not wish to be swayed by Sigrun's words.

However, my resolve only lasted for a while.

[A very ancient being is slumbering there.]

As she continued, my ears perked up as interest overcame my pride.

[If you write about him in song, I bet it will be a cool poem!]

The bird happily cawed when it noticed my interest. Yet, its shape was gradually starting to fall apart.

[I'm afraid this little creature's time has come.]

The chirping bird's beak began to crack, blood flowing down it. Its eyeballs expanded, almost to the bursting point.

[So then, until we meet again…]

The body of the bird was bloating rapidly until it finally burst apart with a squelching sound.

Flesh and feathers spattered all across my room. I reached out and deftly caught one of them. What was a beautiful bird mere moments ago was now bits of meat.

"Wonderful Shira…"

Elder high elves were seldom so casual as to talk about these nasty poems. So I concluded that the being inside the mountain range was at least heroic.

"Be a hero…"

I already knew why she was giving me this information. She was hoping to enjoy a deeper taste of me in three years. The greater the quality of my poems, the better they tasted. Her intentions were clear.

You may sing, but you cannot create a new song.

You may recite, but you cannot write a new poem.

The elves were a race that could never be an audience, a reciter, and a speaker.

This Elder High Elf Sigrun was hoping for a new song.

“This time, I’ll match the beat.”

I was willing to go through with it and made my decision then and there.

* * *

As always, the day was terrifying. Adelia visited my room.

“Your Majesty?”

When she saw me sitting on the sofa, she tilted her head. Then she saw the white feathers and viscera all over the place. Her eyes widened as she stood stock still, gazing at the bird’s remains.

As she took it in, her eyes somehow stretched even wider in a face now deathly pale.

“Adelia, can you clean it up?”

She picked up the Juseom Juseom feather and put it in one place. Then she hesitated for a while and wrapped the bird’s body in cloth.

I watched her quietly as she cleaned.

I had a feeling of reconfirming what kind of beings the elves would use to look through.

With Adelia’s help, I washed my face and got dressed. She then threw on her furs and left the room.

It was then that I headed to the barracks in search of Vincent.

He was within the Ranger’s quarters.

“Your Majesty, how can I help you?”

Vincent had bowed his head slightly. It was a briefer greeting than when we had first met, but it felt far more sincere.

To me, it seemed as if he was respecting a comrade who had fought at his side.

“Tell me about the beasts that live within the mountains, Vincent.”

Orc, Goblin, Gnoll, Kobold: The names of many forms of monsters he told me. Yet, none of them stood out in my mind.

These lesser beasts could never be the topic of a heroic poem.

“Are there more within the mountain itself?”

When I asked this question, Vincent became wary all of a sudden.

“The Rangers travel the mountains a lot Your Majesty, yet we all prefer not to enter it. None of those who have dared to enter have managed to get out alive. I’m guessing that some of the things down there make Orcs look like kittens,” he replied.

“Is there really not one man who has returned?”

“There are none. Even the best rangers never enter the caverns. Their mission is to exterminate the monsters that came down from the mountain. They are soldiers, not explorers.”

I mulled over his words for some time.

“So, no man has ever returned. Does this mean we have no knowledge of what’s inside?”

“That is correct.”

I implored him again to share even the smallest of facts, yet his answer remained the same. The interior spaces of the mountain range remained a complete mystery.

“I thought there were no mysteries left, yet here we still have one.”

Most wonders of this world have long since been explained and categorized by knights who traveled the world, seeking transcendence.

Powerful heterogeneous beings were exterminated, and the ban that did not allow humans to kick was conquered.

Yet here, one of those beings remained. Coming to Balahard seemed to have been an excellent decision.

“I am merely informing you, Your Majesty.”

I was locked in my thoughts until I heard him speak again.

“Do not think about going inside the mountains, Your Majesty. Do you hear me? Do not enter.”

* * *

After that day, a couple more subjugation campaigns were conducted. I did not participate in any of them. Fighting lesser monsters did not hold my interest.

My thoughts were all directed towards the exploration of the mountain range.

What manner of beast lived within?

Just imagining its nature made my heart pound with excitement.

Perhaps it was the Orcish King, whose line was believed to have been cut off 400 years ago, or maybe it was something else entirely.

Either way, it would be a very pleasant meeting.

I repressed my desire to dive into those caverns right away. I knew I was not ready.

More battles and more victories were needed to realize my true character, becoming the ideal that was almost within my grasp.

Fortunately, Balahard was the best place on the continent for a man seeking battle. It would not be difficult to find the victory I wished for here.

One afternoon in the warm sun, a rare thing in midwinter, I heard the sound of a horn.

Aaaooow Wooo!

A Ranger who had been napping in the sunlight jumped up, grabbed his bow, and called to his friends. He then told the soldier blowing the horn to shut up.

Aaaooow Woo!

This second blast awoke the soldiers still sleeping.

“Oh shit! We got trouble, lads!” One of them hollered.

The soldiers who had not slept all ceased what they were doing. They ran towards the wall, all of them knowing that it was the place to be at. A rough wooden door swung open as Rangers poured out of the barracks.

Passing by me, they ran down the stairs as birds in flight. Beneath the olds, the soldiers who had grabbed swords and spears were trembling in front of the city gate. Orders soon filled the air.

“My squad of crossbowmen are in position!”

“Order troops outside the castle!”

The range commanders donned their veils and made sharp sounds accordingly. Hyo-shi flew in all directions.

“I need more arrows here!”

“Someone got rid of the dialysis collection!”

“Move faster, you scum!”

From atop the stairs, I saw the soldiers and commanders employing their armaments.

“Boil the oil first, you dolt!”

The castle’s air was resounding with battle lust and martial language.

“Your Majesty!” Arwen called to me. My uncle had also sent someone to summon me.

“Where is he?”

“Mr. Balahard is on the wall!”

I climbed the stairs with all due haste.

Countless rangers were atop the ramparts, each equipped with a crossbow or bow. They stared beyond the walls, not a single one moving.

And among them, there was my foreign uncle.

"Uncle! What is going on?"

"Look over there," my uncle simply said from his seat atop the gatehouse wall. He then pointed towards an area between the snowfield and the nearby mountain.

I strained my eyes to see what he saw: A white object in the distance.

"Ah… What is…!"

Then, twelve shadows came running through the pure white snow. They were the rangers of Balahard.

They wore cracked and battered armor, held broken swords and shields, and ran at such a pace as to suggest swift pursuit.

Poof… Poof… Poof…

Bright red traceries erupted in the sky behind them as flares were fired from various points within the mountain.

This was the beginning.

Poof… Poof…

Mighty horns echoed their call throughout the castle, greeting the sound and sight of the flares tearing up the sky.

I watched as Rangers on the wall shifted nervously, their breaths became more stressed with every second. There was a wild impatience within their eyes as they watched their comrades traverse the distant snowfield.

"Come on, ye bastards!"

"Run! Run Quickly!" Such shouts of encouragement erupted from a few of them.

Upon hearing the cheers of their comrades, the rangers accelerated their pace.

It was at that very moment that a huge wolf appeared just behind them.

“It’s a Wolf Rider!”

And there, atop the wolf, was a great, green Orc.

“Come on lads, just a little bit more!”

The Rangers on the walls readied their bows.

“It’s still too far out on the snow, lads!”

The commanders calmed down the excited rangers, not wishing to see the arrows wasted.

More riders now joined the hunt.

Aaahooooo! Aaahooooo!

Their wolves howled with a bestial ferocity as they increased their pace. The gap between Rangers and Wolf Riders running was swiftly narrowing.

Aaahooooooooo!

Several of the rearmost rangers suddenly spun around. They would try to earn time for the others to escape, bravely readying their weapons and meeting the Wolf Riders head-on.

Yet, the Wolf Riders crushed them easily, great jaws biting down while the Orcs merrily hacked away with their weapons. Blood and viscera spattered onto the snow as the Rangers fell to the monsters.

The surviving Rangers started running again yet soon halted. They had realized that running from the Wolf Riders was futile, and faced their deaths.

“No! Don’t stop! You fools!”

“Come! It isn’t too far off! Come on lads!”

The Rangers on the wall were shouting hoarsely, some were almost in tears.

Those still on the snow grabbed their broken swords and shattered shields, rushing madly toward the Wolf Riders.

Their lives ended vibrantly, much like red flowers blooming over the snowy field.

The frantic encouragements that the Rangers had moments ago shouted out slowly faded as reality dawned on all. They slowly lowered their bows, not a single arrow or bolt fired as the range had never been there.

Thud!

It was only the booming sound of the closing gate that broke the sorrowful silence.

CHAPTER 45
SUDDENLY, A SEVERE WINTER WAS COMING (2)

"A meal break is permitted for soldiers who do not form part of the current battlement roster. You can recuperate in the barracks until you are called again. However, make sure that you keep your standard armament."

Even upon hearing these orders from my Uncle, none of the soldiers left the ramparts. They did not move. Their eyes were still glued on the Wolf Riders that were moving in the distance.

"Tcha." My Uncle clucked his tongue and motioned for his officers to enact his orders the old fashioned way. They pounced into action, clubbing and kicking the soldiers' asses, finally shoving them down the stairs by their necks.

"Why did you choose not to do it?"

My Uncle asked this as I was watching the commotion.

"What do you mean?"

"Why didn't you save them? If you had been a knight of the quad chain, you would have been required to save the Rangers."

"Even if I sent out the castle's knights, I could not have saved them in time."

"Are you sure of that?"

"It was clearly a trap. What could I do?"

My Uncle did not deny this.

Wolf Riders are known to move as fast as conventional cavalry. The Rangers had had a very slim chance of making it over the snow alive when the Orcs attacked.

Yet, I would never know whether I had kept the knights back for some other unknown

purpose. My Uncle spoke once more, interrupting my train of thought.

“Moving on, I’ve been thinking of marching the troops out towards the secondary gate as soon as possible.”

Vincent approached and did his job: Explaining to me what he had seen occur. After his report, he said this about the Orcs:

“Your Majesty, if any door is open, they rush in, and if a gap exists in your defense, they will stab and bite until they’re sure you’ve stopped breathing.

Common sense doesn’t always work when battling them because their goal is not as strategic as ours. They only seek total annihilation.”

Vincent’s face was grimly set. I felt a great sense of responsibility settle upon me, for I could not save those troops. Nevertheless, he was adamant in expanding his advice:

“Winter has just begun, we cannot move around.”

There were good reasons why battles with monsters were tiring. Their purpose in waging war was different from that of humans. For them, siege-craft meant nothing.

They merely wished to best their prey and consume its meat.

Even if the beasts were well-fed, or scorched by fire and cut by blades, they could not ignore the smell of meat.

That was how the monsters perceived the Winter Castle.

“In addition, snowfields may seem to offer no cover for the foe, but in truth, it gives them an advantage.”

Vincent’s expression became serious.

“The possibility of the Orcs hiding behind that ridge cannot be ruled out. They can easily flank us through the snowdrifts.”

“The Wolf Riders are approaching!” My head snapped up as a lookout shouted out a warning.

Their eyes firmly set on us, the beasts who had decimated the Rangers were approaching our gatehouse.

Some of the wolves were carrying the mangled bodies of Rangers within their maws.

They all came to a halt, cunningly outside the range of our archers.

Chomp. Gnaw. Gnaw.

For a while, the beasts focused on their prey, chewing with such ferocity that I heard the bones crunch. At last, they stopped this macabre act as the Orcs reigned them in, with the bodies of the Rangers flopping like broken dolls to the ground.

“Huh? H-Hey!” A soldier of the line shouted.

“Alive! They’re alive!”

Some of the Rangers did indeed show signs of life. A few of them were slowly crawling closer to the walls, using their comrades’ corpses as cover.

The Wolf Riders did not move. I got the impression that they were waiting for something.

After a while, my suspicions proved true as another group of Wolf Riders appeared. Their wolves also held human bodies clenched in their jaws.

Vincent identified them as Winter Castle Rangers, who had been on a recon assignment.

These bloody Rangers were also flung to the ground, but they were all breathing.

More groups of Wolf Riders appeared one after the other. And each time they appeared, the number of rangers lying on the snow increased.

I counted thirty-six corpses and twenty-two living Rangers in all.

“It’s really bad this winter.” The voice of my Uncle was heavy with emotion.

“We’ve suffered more this time around.”

Vincent’s voice was as heavy as that of my kinsman. The soldiers that stood near us were all shocked to the core as well.

The question of morale entered my mind, for there were still survivors upon the field.

It was a tactical dilemma.

Many honest soldiers held the irresistible urge always to save their comrades, no matter the odds. Yet, the collective good always had to be held into account.

The men that now lay at lupine feet were all veterans of Winter. Most of them understood that at times commanders had to make decisions that, while of strategic benefit, came at the cost of their lives. Having given no order to charge the Orcs and liberate the Rangers, I knew my inaction had dealt my men's morale a heavy blow, yet we had avoided an obvious but dangerous ploy by our foe.

Days like these seldom boded well for the future of Winter Castle.

"This is the first time that something like this has happened. It is unusual for the Orcs to attack so swiftly and so effectively," stated Vincent.

"The last battle we fought, they were swift. Now they have come with Wolf Riders. What are their plans?"

I had spoken the day before with my Uncle of this previous battle.

For some reason, his words reminded me of those damned Elder High Elves.

Sigrun. Did that blasted elf have a part to play in this?

After considering the situation, I started to doubt whether she had a finger in this pie.

"Waaaghhhhh!"

A roar, unlike any sound humanly possible, pierced my ears. It came from a beast utilizing its vocal chords' full capacity.

The Orc upon the greatest wolf was gesturing at us while still shouting: "Waaaaaghhh!"

"Commander, sir! What are your orders?" The senior officers were gathered around my Uncle. We all knew that the Orcs were preparing to execute their prisoners.

"We wait," said my Uncle, after seeing that such was my wish.

“Commander, sir! There is no time for this! We won’t be able to save them later!” Bellowed an impatient knight, sword in hand. With every moment, it seemed as if he wanted to vault over the wall and charge the Orcs.

My Uncle raised his hand. All voices ceased at once as the soldiers averted their eyes. He then turned to me.

“What do you think they are going to do?”

Instead of answering him, I looked once more towards our foe.

The extraordinarily huge Orc raised a bloody flag. To any other man, it would seem but a simple flag. However, to me, its pattern was known.

The Orc cried out.

What to my soldiers sounded like bestial howls of hatred, I understood as words.

“Let us do battle! I will fight with honor and take victory for my Legion!”

The language of ancient Orcs, long lost to scholarly memory, freely flowed out of its bloody maw.

As I saw the Orc waving its flag overhead, I remembered the conversation I had with Sigrun.

[There is something I need to tell you about, deep within the mountain range.]

[A very ancient being is slumbering there.]

[If you about him in song, I bet it will be a cool poem!]

I now knew what she had meant. I now knew what I needed to do.

The great king was within my grasp!

That noisy Orc had managed to give me the answer I so dearly sought, and I knew why it had collected Rangers.

* * *

“So you’re saying that those Orcs are holding hostages in order to request a duel?”

As I nodded, my Uncle sighed.

Orcs who demand a duel with words of honor are strange, yet a human who spoke Orcish was rarer still. My Uncle’s expression showed very clearly that he was unused to such things. There was no other way to handle this situation. I had to accept this.

“Crak harakgu! Krarakda gnukdok! Crax!”

I stood on the wall and shouted this at the Orcs. That uncomfortable language flowed out of my mouth, each syllable feeling and sounding as if I was chewing iron nails.

The Orcs were surprised to hear my response. The giant Wolf Rider, who seemed to be the chief, pointed at me and shouted.

Roughly interpreted, it went like this:

“No, how does this human know the language of the clan?”

It was an expected reaction for an Orc. I ignored his question and shouted: “I’ll accept the duel, if your fighters dismount their wolves and lead them three hundred steps away.”

The Orc chief made a crude noise in response.

“It is for clan blood, human! Many must fight.”

I held the silence for a while, letting my demand sink in.

I realized that this creature had a complex chain of thought for an Orc and was thus a foe to be measured well.

“I’ll send the others back!” shouted the Orc chief, who furthermore promised that he would personally kill the Orc who broke the laws of honor.

“What the hell are you saying?” asked my Uncle.

Others were also looking at me as if I was one of the wyrd.

“Why don’t you see for yourself?” I responded.

Excluding the five Orcs chosen to participate in the duel, the other Wolf Riders were all retreating. My Uncle and his officers struggled to hide their surprise.

“I, I… What are they doing?!”

“No, what the hell is this?”

Although they’d been through dozens of winters in Ballahad, not one of the men on the walls had ever seen such a thing.

The Orc chief now bellowed out more terms for the duel.

“There are five of us participating in the duel. Our opponents should be the same humans we fought in the mountains.”

Much discussion followed as to determine who were to face the foe.

Vincent was chosen and the Knight of the Triple Chain, who had fought on that day.

“I shall go! I will avenge the Rangers’ enemies!” Vincent cried with passion.

A great cheer erupted from all the gathered soldiery at his words. Two places within the party were by default mine and Arwen’s. A few knights, veterans and grudge-bearers toward Orcs, grumbled that lords would be risking themselves out of hand. I enlightened them to a simple fact: Regardless of the situation, I was the one who spoke Orcish.

I ignored their opposition, yet understood their concerns.

“Where did you learn the words of the Orcs? I’ve never heard of the Orcs as talking opponents,” asked my Uncle.

“I studied.” This reply I gave him, my smile cold.

Only I knew that it took hundreds of years to master ancient Orcish and other tongues beside it.

The Orcish chief and his five warriors were starting to show signs of impatience.

My Uncle looked in their direction. “If we had known this before, would it be possible to settle things with them in a diplomatic fashion?”

“This is a very rare occurrence, uncle.”

Only those Orcs who served the Clan King directly could speak the ancient language, and the beast before our walls was among those servants.

After embarking upon my journey across the world, an elven embassy had visited the kingdom, among which had been Elder High Elves.

Simultaneously, the Orcish king appeared in the North for the first time in four centuries. Should I consider this a coincidence?

No… there were few true coincidences in a universe of cause and effect. When strange beings moved about, strange events followed them like carrion fish in the wake of a wounded whale.

“Let us go and meet our fate!” I said to those who had finally been chosen, my comrades in the fight to come.

Krrroooo… Krooooo… Krooooo…

The guards within the gatehouse ratcheted their chains as they lifted the great gate using nothing but their strength.

Krooooo… Tchaaaaak.

It now stood open. I could not help but wonder how swiftly the Wolf Riders beyond that white snowy field could swarm into our position.

I led my party of knights from the gate, some soldiers bewildered at my recklessness, yet looking on in expectation, for they revered our prowess in battle.

A feeling of brief transcendence struck me, and I made sure my knights saw the purest aspiration towards victory written across my entire being.

Even if this duel had been on behest of the Orc chief, I would gladly grant him battle and, if need be, oblivion.

Vincent and the knights each pointed out which Orc they wished to face, looking for faces they knew.

I acted as interpreter and informed each Orc in turn on who their opponent would be.

Those Orcs that had still been mounted now descended to the ground, the wolves somehow knowing that they now had to keep their distance.

“Well, Your Majesty? I’m sure I can deal with him,” Vincent said as he thrust his chin at the giant fellow who had directly challenged me.

I did not even acknowledge his words. Instead, my eyes locked onto the chieftain’s.

This one was, of course, mine, and mine alone to engage.

CHAPTER 46
SUDDENLY, A SEVERE WINTER WAS COMING (3)

“Is it you who shall face me?” the Orc chief asked me.

“Yes… Are you not satisfied with me?”

“We will fight, you and I. You have a strong spirit.”

The knights, rangers, and Orcs stood upon the snow, silent deathly stares passing between man and beast. It was with a grudging look of respect that their leader looked at me, and I sensed no bias against me in his heart: Something that was rare and deadly within any foe.

“You, youngling, have good blood. I will eat the rarest of delicacies today!”

An ancient Orcish belief held that to consume the flesh of a foe was to absorb a measure of its power.

With a thud, the beast slammed its halberd’s two-meter haft into the ground, holding it out next to him in a pompous stance.

“Your Majesty, can you best this thing?” Vincent mouthed to me, his resolve wavering. Just as he spoke, the halberd was propelled into a two-handed grip, with its vicious blade pointing at Vincent, who gulped in fear. “Orcs despise waiting. Stop wasting our time with idle talk.”

I roved my eyes across the distant mountains, seeing the sky take on more somber colors as duck approached.

“We will win this, Vincent,” I spoke to bolster his and other hearts.

Then, the entire Orcish army erupted into a roaring cacophony of bestiality. Their chief stood immobile, unfazed by their shouting. No, his eyes, those yellow orbs with red irises, never strayed from me. He moistened his lips with his foul tongue. The hunger for my flesh was as an open book stapled onto his face. Fortunately, I valued my blood

and flesh more than he did.

“Let us see how you taste,” grunted the Orc. I started a chant, letting it flow from my lips. The chant soon took on the form of the Poem of Divorce, its power welling up within me.

* * *

A full-throated Orcish roar as the one we faced had the effect of preparing their bodies for a battle while also lowering their foes’ morale. It was not uncommon for soldiers to drop their weapons, faint, or even flee when the bestial cacophony washed into them. It was a terrible sound. I noticed with pride that my Balahardian comrades stood fast. Veterans of wars against the Orc, they had long since grown stoic when faced with such brutal malice.

However, their resolve was tested when the chief Orc let loose his roar, an earth-shattering sound that buffeted us with a sudden wind. We were all forced back a step or two, and even the rangers on the walls seemed to flinch. Men who had faced all manner of Orcish trickery looked at one another in confusion. They warily held their silence, awaiting further developments. What we faced was no troll or ogre, merely an Orc. Our hearts should have been fearless, yet this beast had somehow shaken our collective resolve with a single roar.

I felt like a green recruit once more, shaking in his breeches in his first battle. Mastery of my senses soon returned as I stood proud once more, my companions following my example. The Orc, sensing our recuperation, wasted no time in signaling an imminent attack.

“Let’s get them, boys!” shouted one of my knights as he planted his feet in the snow, sword at the ready. We were prepared for whatever was to come. That ancient burning hatred quickly replaced the lethargy and anxiety that the Orc’s roar had instilled within my men. Shouts of encouragement rang from the castle walls as rangers and soldiers alike encouraged us to slaughter every last beast we faced.

Flags fluttered upon the ramparts of Winter Castle as so many men started to clang their weapons upon steel and stone in support of we few who awaited battle.

I straightened my back, looked at my men, and thrust my sword into the air. “This is our land, and now is the time to reclaim it!”

* * *

The chief did not yet goad his clan into an attack, having yet more words to share with me. “What a shabby power, that song of yours, young boy.”

The thing stared at me from beneath greasy eyebrows. “Orc, you can only blame yourself for the misfortune of meeting me today.”

“Fight well,” the Orc said, “and I shall treat you with honor, as if we were kin.”

“Hah! You presume too much,” I retorted. “No honor shall be shown to your kind. Your corpse will hang within a gibbet from my walls. Crows and maggots shall feast in joy upon you, preaching your defeat to all who are wise enough to hear of it.”

The beast shook its head almost sadly. “You talk too much, and still I see you as someone without honor.”

He clucked his tongue as a grandmother would at her disobedient descendants.

“It is certain then, that we shall dine upon your flesh today.”

I modulated my tone, willing to show at least a smidge of recognition towards the foe. “My words are harsh, Orc, because I am at war. Had you been a merchant and I a farmer, we might have shared a barrel of ale. However, we are enemies, not comrades.”

In a deliberate show of impiety, he mounted the bloodied flag of Winter onto his back. I knew that these beasts would be charging us at any moment.

Once more, I thrust my blade into the air, a keening sound emanating from it. By arcane means, a hundred different emotions flowed through my body and into the sword, and vice versa. I felt the resentment and battle lust of a hundred rangers, all the soldiers’ anger upon the ramparts flowing through me. As I had borrowed the power of the sword, I knew I had to surrender to its will.

My entire body started to shake violently, my karma overflowing in a wild, unchecked torrent, pain invading every molecule of my being.

I kept the power contained, bearing against the pain, waiting for the scales of karma (業) and salt (念) to once more even out within my soul.

It was then that everything went down the drain as red beams of energy exploded from the Orc's eyes, melting the snow where I had stood mere moments before.

"An Orcish shaman!" I informed my soldiers, finally bringing the words of my poem and the power of my sword to bear on the now charging Orcs, slamming a few of them to the ground with a blinding wave of twilight.

* * *

This field of battle was small due to the lessened number of warriors on each side. There would be no grand strategy here, just a messy brawl where a single mistake could spell disaster for either side. Having been repulsed by my power, the body of Orcs now moved with greater care, clustered around their chief. This would be a difficult fight, for the enemy stuck together, finally closing in on us with axes and knives, their blows savage and constant. We were hard-pressed, parrying, dodging, and blocking for all that we were worth.

Every time that I tried to slash at a throat or open a belly, I had to avert another blow or inhibit my swing lest I hit one of my allies. My frustration started to build, for this was not the usual fighting style of Orcs. They fought as we did, in a unit, their leader acting as their core as he roared out orders.

"Kill their cub king, damned be all!" it shouted, hurling a knife in my direction. I ducked beneath the spinning blade, kicking at the Orc's hip, my leg pulsing with magical energies. It was caught off-guard, momentarily thrown off-balance as it staggered back. It reeled in shock at my impudence. It was just me and it now, and I roared my battle-lust as blue flames embraced my blade like the caress of a long-lost lover.

"Waaagh!" It roared, blood already dripping from the head of its halberd.

'Clang!'

Our weapons met as the divine flame from mine evaporated the blood on his in a hiss of pink steam.

'Clang!'

The blue flames suddenly encountered a baleful red light, the same accursed light that had exploded from the Orc's eyes.

‘Clang!’

Blue and red embers cascaded onto the snow with each strike.

‘CLANG!’

Our respective energies petered out, spent, and now it became a contest of metal upon metal. All other fighting had ceased due to the fact that neither Orc nor knight had ever seen such a bout between their respective kinds.

I read in Vincent’s eyes just how terrifying this shaman of a foe I faced truly was. Could I beat it?

Our arms clashed once more, the holy steel of my blade shattering the ax-head of the halberd into so many metal fragments. I immediately embraced this chance. I worked past my foe’s desperate attempts at blocking, first severing his one arm and then the other in a perfectly executed maneuver that saw me rush right into him from one side and then the other with elegant scythe-like cuts.

“Aghhhaaaaa!” It howled its pain, even as I started butchering its legs with savage hacks. In less than a minute, the beast had all its limbs severed, with my boot now squarely placed upon its torso. Once more, I suffused my blade with blue flame, reversing my grip and thrusting it into my foe’s chest. The inferno that followed was great, spreading out from me in a rolling mass of intense heat.

“Your Majesty!” A sergeant hollered, making ready to rush into the conflagration to pull me out. The Orcs stood impassively by, knowing that their leader was gone and their attack, for now, rudderless.

“Do not approach! The flame doesn’t hurt me, but it can surely incinerate you!”

My voice was without pain or urgency, and I saw relief wash over Vincent and Isa’s faces.

At that exact moment, though, the entire situation dissolved into chaos. A great noise came from the plains, the mountains, seemingly from the sky itself. The souls of my men withered as the ground shook under the ravages of some ancient power. Blue traceries of magical energy arced through the sky, their source somewhere deep within the mountains.

With them came an object, seemingly hurled toward me with great anger. It took all the reserves of magic within me to halt this missile's course, yet so great was its momentum that I could only divert it, and then it still struck a vital target. The great iron spear, thicker than a grown man's muscled arm and five meters in length, slammed with a great force through the stone walls of Winter Castle.

The Orc chief had been slain, yet here was a new and more terrifying threat: The breaching of our defenses from such a considerable distance, and by an unknown entity.

CHAPTER 47
ONCE YOU FACE A WONDER, YOU CAN NEVER GO BACK TO THE PAST (1)

All the soldiers were upon the walls, shocked at the spear that had torn through our defenses like a hot knife through butter. Arwen did not focus upon the breach, though; rather, she searched for the prince.

It was under a small heap of snow that she chanced upon him, his legs sticking out, one of them twitching slightly. My hands were numbed from the battle, yet I moved toward her as she singled out the prince's position. Arwen did not wait upon me, rushing towards the young lord who had clearly been wounded in the battle. The boy's hand was reaching out as if grasping for his mother. The skin upon his hand was peeling off in shreds.

"My prince!" Arwen shouted, grabbing his hand and freeing him from the snow. I came to them, immediately assessing the boy's condition. His entire jaw was covered in blood, as well as his upper torso. It seemed as if he had vomited blood in the battle.

His right hand, still grasping his sword, was twisted at a bizarre angle that could only be described as painful.

"Your Majesty, are you still with us?" I gently asked as I tapped his forehead. He sputtered, bloody foam throwing through my fingers as I cupped his cheeks.

I made way for Arwen, who began breathing into the prince's mouth, waiting for him to catch his breath, then once more artificially filling his lungs with air.

'Bleuegh,' went the prince as he vomited bloody bile. My fingers were upon his pulse, which, to my relief, had started beating at a regular rate once more.

Arwen slouched down onto the ground, her relief plain. I held onto the prince's hand, hoping to comfort him. His gloves were torn to shreds, and great gouges were cut into his calloused hands.

The poor boy had gone through hard times. As I released his hand, Arwen grasped it. Her hands were small and soft, at first glance not suited to wielding a sword. The prince was breathing steadily, his eyes still closed. As I looked upon his face, I saw no sign of the arrogant young whelp who had looked down upon everyone. Here was simply a boy, who had given all in the battle against the Orcs.

Had he always been this short and young? Such thoughts flashed through my head as I looked upon his ravaged form. These musings of mine were reflected upon Arwen's face, for she realized he had yet to have a coming of age ceremony.

A knight approached us. "How is His Majesty?" he asked, in a manner that seemed cold to me. The other knights who had fought with us also approached, some holding helmets in their hands as a sign of respect. I did not appreciate the attitude of the knight who had spoken, yet I kept my silence. It was then that the prince awoke, wiping his mouth.

"Your Majesty! Arwen is here for you," I said as he slowly sat up.

He tried to say something, yet only a mere sigh escaped his lips. Arwen placed her ear next to his mouth, listening to his whispered words.

"What did he say?" the eldest son of Winter Castle asked.

Arwen stood, adjusting her sword.

"His Majesty told me that… that we should end this fight."

"T… The orc wishes to eat… kill… orc! Honor… shit, motherfucker, only orc dead… shit dead good orc." the prince finally managed to blurt out.

Although his words made little sense, Arwen understood his intended meaning. Through great profanity and pain, the prince had expressed his wish to end this duel as fast as possible.

"The prince commands us to kills the Orcs!" she shouted at the gathered men.

Knights readied their swords and charged at the gaggle of confused Orcs. Having lost their chief, they simply turned tail and ran. These lowly beasts were no match for the knights of Winter Castle, and they knew that much. However, it was then that the Orcs who had retreated rallied into a charge, their war cry ringing out against castle walls

and mountain cliffs.

“Take your charges inside! Take care of the Rangers!” I bellowed out, the need for retreat plain to even the most naive student of the battlefield.

The gate ground open, Rangers rushing outside to load the wounded onto stretchers. We all made haste in our retreat, the gates finally slamming shut with a satisfying thud.

The entire courtyard was filled with jubilant noise as the Rangers gathered around us.

“Hey, you motherfuckers, we are alive because of you! That Orc boss would’ve torn through the walls with its spells!”

“Your cheers aided us in battle,” I told a group of veteran rangers. More applause and congratulations enveloped our group after I spoke those words.

Winter Castle was a truly strange place, for many had died, yet the unbounded joy of the soldiery echoed against the walls.

I knew that some celebrated the return of captured and wounded Rangers thought lost to the wolves, and others reveled in the victory we had attained against the Orc boss.

The prince was borne through the gates upon his stretcher.

“He is precious! Hurry up and take him to the healers!” Arwen commanded those that carried him.

She stared at the pitiful appearance of the prince, his one arm already bandaged into a splint.

I chanced to hear his whispered words.

“Fuck Orc cubs… no honor in their bones… the only good Orc is a dead Orc.”

His voice held great anger within it, despite the pain. I wished to ask him about his experiences in the battle, yet he had once more slipped into unconsciousness. His last whispered word had been: “Arwen…”

The eldest son of Winter Castle, walked along with the stretcher, his single statement

curt and rational:

“They celebrate too early. This battle is far from over.”

He offered the bloody flag that the Orc boss had worn to Vincent.

“I believe this is yours.”

“Will he survive after losing that much blood?” Arwen asked, her concern reaching an almost hysteric tone.

“Calm down,” I said to her. Her overreaction was plain upon her face.

The effects of the battle now caught up to me as I tasted the blood within my mouth, with dizziness enveloping my mind and almost forcing me to the ground.

I washed my face in a nearby trough, seeing my red eyes in the reflected water. Winter Castle had a breach in its walls. This was not the time to be vulnerable.

* * *

The very instant that I had plunged my sword into the Orc boss’s chest was scorched into my mind. Our gazes had met, his probing my essence to the core.

It had been a very different experience when compared to the mysterious attentions of the Elder High Elf, who was a Quan Yin. No, his stare had been brutal, his savage spirit knowing no defeat even in death. It was as if he was a giant, staring down upon a majestic yet minuscule world. In him was a fragment of a greater being, this I knew, and this being was the same one that Arwen had warned me about.

His last words, only heard by myself, had been in praise of the King of the Orcs, rather than being a lament against humanity or a plea for mercy.

Somehow I knew that the Warlord had watched through the eyes of his Orc noble as I ended its life. I had sensed its malevolent anger at the impudence of a mere man slaying one of its toys.

And now I was in bed, my wounds having taken their toll.

I could have acted without honor, ordering a Ranger to end the Orc boss from afar

before I fought with it.

My wounds were the results of my own miscalculation, and the reason why I now lay in my bed like some weakling.

“Fucking Orcs!” I swore aloud, yet saying this did little to improve my mood.

The one comfort I had was the fact that my performance in the battle had been at an extraordinary level.

“How’re you feeling now?” Vincent asked as he appeared at my bedside.

“My entire body hurts. However, what hurts the most is the fact that the battle isn’t finished yet, and I’m already in this state.” The anger in my tone was palpable, yet Vincent still managed to crack a smile. It slowly faded from his face as he began to blush.

“Thanks to your brave stand, we were able to save lives we thought we would have lost. The entire castle is grateful.”

His voice was sincere, not a fragment of his previous dislike of me to be heard. His honesty embarrassed me, so I simply rubbed my nose and nodded.

Vincent gave me his latest report, stating a legion of Orcs had set up camp about a kilometer from the castle. It was divided into two corps, each containing twenty squads.

“Despite the speed at which they encamped, we can defeat them.” The doubt showed on his face as he spoke. He hesitated. “What was that spear, and the energy that flowed from the mountains?” As he asked this, my uncle and other lords of Winter Castle entered the room. I could see that they shared his question.

As I explained things to them, I realized that they thought that the Orc boss I had killed was the King and not a mere noble. I tried to simplify the situation for them.

“The Orcish King of the mountains had been awakened. Winter Castle is now the border between our kingdom, and the kingdom of the Orcs. Those beasts gathered before our walls are a mere vanguard, many more will pour from their mountains.”

I saw many dubious faces gathered around my sickbed.

“Even if what Your Majesty says is true, why would the Orcs follow a king who had just awakened? Wouldn’t they follow their chieftains instead?”

At Vincent’s words, the commanders nodded, obviously sharing his belief.

I patiently formed my response.

“Tell me, what Orc will challenge a being that can thrust a mighty spear from such an impossible distance? The fact that this King has just woken up does not matter. What matters is how powerful he is.”

The commanders clearly still held their doubts, yet respected my observations without arguing. This was new.

“What is this king of the Orcs named?” Vincent asked me. I sat up, racking my brain for the required piece of lore.

“Warlord,” I said, uttering a name that was four hundred years old.

Hearing the tension in my tone, some of the lords’ faces grew pale. I caught my uncle eyes. “You believe this to be true, the awakening of this Orc?’

I nodded somberly.

“We have to create a defense strategy, then,” he plainly stated.

“We need to call for help as fast as possible,” a young commander added.

The lords and commanders now unfurled a map on a table next to me, these veterans of Winter Castle showcasing their experience as they formulated battle plans. My input was asked for from time to time and greatly appreciated. My uncle had a kindly smile as he observed the proceedings, which went on for many hours.

It was when only Arwen and Adelia were left that my uncle asked the one question that had been burning him up inside.

“Was that blue flame the power of Muhunshi you talked about?”

Arwen glanced at me while Adelia showed her confusion.

I nodded in response.

My uncle closed his eyes tightly, entering a thoughtful silence.

After a while, they fluttered open. They were not the same dull old eyes I had grown used to, and his voice was now low and powerful.

“Is such power allowed for the Knights of Gori?”

I laughed heartily, for this had been a long-awaited question.

CHAPTER 48
ONCE YOU FACE A WONDER, YOU CAN NEVER GO BACK TO THE PAST (2)

“No, Uncle, they are not.”

“Such a pity. Will you pass on the Muhunshi technique?”

“I don’t know. The user needs stabler and faster mana to use it. It is also forgotten if you know Mana Heart.”

It was strange that Gori’s knights had not yet tried to restore Muhunshi, claiming it as theirs. The had had four-hundred years to do so. Even a Muhunshi that did not reach the level of [myth] or [hero poem] was still powerful. The poetry of Muhunshi was treated as cheap songs nowadays. Either way, many geniuses had tried and failed to combine Gori and Muhunshi.

The stern eyes of my Uncle fell upon me, and I saw understanding bloom within them.

“Hmmm, I see now,” he said in all seriousness, with me barely containing a chuckle. I had been on this earth for some time and reflected upon the knowledge and experience I had gained throughout that period. Many possibilities swirled around within my head, yet one answer came to the fore: “The elves shall change their mind once they sing Muhunshi.”

My Uncle frowned at this mention of the elven folk. There was a comparison that could be drawn between the elves and the knights. As the knights stored mana in rings, the elves used their bodies to store mana. None of them stored their mana or karma in their hearts.

“They cannot write poems, only recite those created by others. Yet, the power of their verses can still be a terrible thing to witness.”

They could not reach transcendence through poetry, yet could still channel great power through it. This was because they had what was called ‘Gummu’.

They admired Muhunshi, for it was a rhythmic sword dance like no other. This could be seen when considering [Dancing Magic Swordsman, Sigrun]

Sigrun, for that very reason, was called the Dancing Demoness Swordfighter. My Uncle was still mulling over these new concepts.

“And it is possible to write a new poem as one sings it?” He finally asked.

“For me, perhaps, though this would be so chaotic that they would need to be echoed through rings set up at a certain resonant frequency. I would rather leave these feats to the knights and the elves. You know I have chosen to follow the path of power from within the heart.”

I could see that Arwen was also deep in thought, considering the facets of resonance and performance. She wore two rings and was eager to learn more about their use. A universe full of possibilities stretched before her like a forest filled with hidden trees of knowledge.

Adelia did not seem to be following the thread of conversation, rather giving me anxious glances from time to time, her concern at my health evident. I held a slight smile as I appreciated her unwavering loyalty.

Meanwhile, Arwen and my Uncle remained locked deep in their own thoughts. I idly wondered when I would be left at peace in my own room.

* * *

Arwen was the first to leave, her thoughts having reached a conclusion. My Uncle remained, as did Adelia, who had begun dozing off in her chair. My breathing was still somewhat painful, so I had to talk less. I gave my Uncle a glance, then began studying the world outside from the adjacent window.

The soldiers went about their business, under constant supervision by the commanders and their shouted orders. I watched the activity, as well as the winter landscape, for some time before falling into a comfortable sleep.

When I finally awoke, a fire was crackling within the hearth.

My Uncle was nowhere in sight. Adelia was sleeping next to me, drool dripping from her mouth as she snored away in peace.

“Adelia, wake up,” I said, nudging her shoulder with my elbow. She dreamily sat up, wiping the spittle from her face. She reached for an ewer on the bed-stand, pouring a glass of water and handing it to me. I drank it greedily.

“Where’s my Uncle?”

“He has just left,” she replied, fixing a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“Did anything new happen while I was asleep?”

“Oh, nothing to get out of bed for,” was her idle response.

Tcha. I clucked my tongue, not too disappointed that I still had time to lay in bed.

“Not every moment needs to be one of enlightenment, or meaningful action. To create a new path through simple words: Isn’t that the goal of the superhuman?”

“There are many paths leading into the future,” she answered, not completely grasping my words yet still responding in a manner that showcased her fine wit.

Muhunshi was the miracle of my being, and the Warlord the current mystery that I sought to unravel. After some time, my Uncle returned.

“You are awake,” were his only words. I glanced at Adelia, for something had clearly happened while we had slept. His eyes were pinched in worry, his entire body stiff as if expecting danger at any given moment. Yet, my own mood had improved after resting.

I sat up, feeling relaxation embrace my body and a benevolent generosity enter my heart. I gave a short chuckle. My mirth got its source in the simple fact that my Uncle seemed more regal and capable than ever before. Recent events had kindled within him stone-like bravery; his soul and body have reached the balance of a true swordmaster. While he was a blank, a man without mana or karma, his skill more than made up for this.

“Congratulations, Uncle. I see something has changed within you.”

He bowed low. “My gratitude, Your Majesty. It was you who opened my eyes to the truth that I refused to see before. Thank you, Ian.”

My heart leapt with joy, for this had been the first time my Uncle had called me by my true name. I ran a sweaty hand through my hair in embarrassment, which in turn elicited a hearty guffaw from my Uncle.

“For a man who never changes, only the arms of death await.” I blurted out, unsure as to where the words had come from.

“You seem upset, Ian.”

“No, Uncle, I do not believe I am.”

I touched my four-hundred-year-old sword. I had now become a sword expert, no longer being a sword master. Grumpiness was too simple a term for my current mood.

“Why did you come here?” I asked of him, my displeasure at his casual familiarity plain.

“There is something that’s been bothering me, Your Majesty.”

My stomach gave a pained growl. “What is it, Uncle?”

His head turned toward the distant snow-capped peaks.

“I must end whatever lies in wait there. I want to march in as soon as possible.” I knew that he sought to end the reign of the Warlord.

“By the God… I once saved a woman from drowning, yet even after she had regained her life, all could plainly see that she had given up. This was what I dreamed of last night. I knew I should end this right away.”

I raised my hand, stopping my Uncle before he could embarrass himself further.

“The Warlord will be mine to defeat, Uncle.”

He laughed at my words, stating: “Very well, he is yours then.”

My statement was uttered in all seriousness, yet I saw in his eyes that he did not respect my conclusion.

* * *

It was then that he asked me questions that had surely been bothering him for some time now.

“Many things are still left unanswered. How is it that you are so knowledgeable about the Orcs? I also know, Your Majesty, that you have spoken with elves before. You seem to know about their lore.”

I considered his words, thinking back upon the time when I had stolen the Founding King’s Dragon Slayer. I thought of the many books to be found in this world and the knowledge they had gifted me.

“I believe I will tell you when the time comes, Uncle.”

His eyes bore into me. I could see the loyalty within his heart, yet his gaze still sent shivers down my spine. At times, people changed too much, and I wondered what personal hell my Uncle was going through at this very moment.

In that instant, the castle erupted with noise. Laughing voices, frantic orders, and excited cheers were all punctuated by the battle horn that once more signaled the dawn of battle.

“You must rest and become well, Your Majesty,” said my Uncle as he adjusted his sheath.

“No… I will join you. You need me to be able to explain the situation to you.”

He merely nodded and left the room as I hastily dressed and ran after him; my arm was still throbbing in pain.

Once upon the ramparts, I saw that the Rangers had all gathered already, bows at the ready, and their gazes set upon the snowfield.

The great Orcish army spanned the horizon. Most of their weapons were crude, yet all saw that they had trundled great siege machines into their ranks.

This was troubling. A giant Orc stood among the others. His size was greater than the Orc boss I had just defeated, and a bloody flag danced in the wind behind him.

“Is that the Warlord?” asked my Uncle, keeping his voice low.

I shook my head.

“I think he’s the spearhead of the Warlord’s assault, one of his most combat corps commanders. He is a Night Slayer.”

CHAPTER 49
ONCE YOU FACE A WONDER, YOU CAN NEVER GO BACK TO THE PAST (3)

Whereas knights spent mana, Orc warriors used battle fervor.

Battle fervor was a magical force that could sharpen the blade of a rusty ax and strengthen the body. The more an Orc had fought, the stronger its fervor became, and the more foes it could slay. This force was the absolute criterion by which the greatness of an Orc was measured.

There were mutant Orcs gifted with enormous reserves of battle fervor from birth. These Orcs were bigger, stronger, and more ferocious than ordinary Orcs. Due to the fact that Orcs despised challenges to their power, most of these mutants were killed while still young. However, some survived into adulthood, whether by luck or perseverance.

These mutants were special beings, more sensitive to the use of battle fervor, more bloodthirsty, and more attuned to the auras of living beings. The power of seeing auras was revered by Orcs, and they called it [Open Eyes]. Its users were called Night Slayers.

Not only did these mutants have greater battle fervor and used [Open Eyes], they could also see the mana flowing through a knight's body. These terrible monsters could predict the future actions of a knight that had yet to act.

Calling these beasts nightmares was fitting indeed.

"I can't believe that such an Orc exists in this world!"

"Yes, I have fought against countless Orcs, yet I have never seen or heard of such creatures."

"Open Eyes… isn't that an overwhelming ability for a single Orc?"

Vincent and the commanders had expressed strong disbelief at my explanation of

what the Night Slayer was. I clucked my tongue in a warning manner.

“If your body freezes up before you draw your blade, you will have no choice but to believe me. There is a bigger problem, though.

The Night Slayer is a natural commander. He does not know tactics or strategy but knows better than any Orc how to take down foes.

This was due to the power of [Open Eyes]. He saw into the dense lines of infantry, knew where the weak spots were, and could predict an entire army’s movement.

All was visible to the Night Slayer. He tears into weakened lines like a badger and sends his strongest weapons to where defense is needed. He is as persistent as a snake on the attack and rock-hard on the defense. What more could one want in a commander? The problem was, this being was our enemy, not our ally. His army now made such a noise that the earth shook with the sound.

“You have been right so far, so this time, your words must also be true.”

The bottomless trust within my Uncle’s words made the Winter Castle leaders see things as I saw them.

“I can’t help but check.”

My Uncle took a spear from the soldier who stood next to me.

“I’m going to slay that Orc. Let’s see if it deserves the name of Night Slayer, a name that they say is so great that men lose their minds at hearing it.”

There came a loud cheer, and a strange wave spread over the battlefield. My Uncle’s arm muscles bunched up tautly.

‘Whooosh!’

The spear flew through the sky with great speed and at a precise trajectory. The throw seemed perfect.

Yet, it was all for naught. From the instant that my Uncle had grabbed the spear, the Night Slayer had been ready for him.

It channeled its battle fervor, and the spear exploded mid-air.

'Bang!'

The Night Slayer looked our way and opened its mouth in a hungry and very brutal smile. It looked at us as if we were its next prey.

It held out its hand as another Orc gave a spear to it. He then sprinted a short distance, throwing his spear under the added momentum, once more activating its fervor and channeling it into the weapon.

It flew in our direction with an air-piercing sound. My Uncle plucked the spear out of the sky.

"I do not know much, but I know that it has a temper which does not accept defeat."

My Uncle smiled as he brushed the residue of the Night Slayer's battle fervor from his hands. For the first time in my life, I realized how much he has changed. His lust for victory had been awakened by seeing how strong this opponent was.

I started laughing without knowing why, feeling the battle atmosphere.

"Ian," my Uncle said, taking his eyes off of the Night Slayer. "If I'm not mistaken, you seem to know how to deal with this Orc."

Vincent and the heads of Winter Castle expressed surprise at his words.

"Why would you think so?"

My Uncle burst into laughter. "I want to see your face," he retorted.

"My face?"

My face was filled with excitement, for we would be facing a Night Slayer, who was almost as powerful as the Warlord. I still knew that I was just a man, and not some emotionless weapon, merely a sword to be unsheathed whenever war reared its ugly head.

The blood-thirst and focus within me made me feel warm all over. I was anxious to test my knowledge, experience, and strength. I wished to test my body.

People who were looking at me shuddered. It seemed that my blood-lust and eagerness was clear for all to see. I hid my expression too late. I coughed a bit, readying my voice, and then I spoke:

“All his commands follow the abilities of [Open Eyes].”

This meant that the Night Slayer’s command was efficient but still contained inherent weaknesses. He had to rely on what he saw, which might only be a fraction of the battle. “Additionally, no matter how patient he is, he is still an Orc. There exists no greater virtue than seeking delicious delicacies for the Orcs.”

Night Slayer, the spearhead of the Warlord, found nothing more delicious than victory.

“Let us prepare this dining table properly.”

All we had to do was lay the plates so he could turn from a cunning commander into a beastly Orc.

* * *

“Impossible! It’s too dangerous!”

My plan ran into resistance from the start.

“I told you, it sees us all. Clumsy tricks might not work.”

“Even so, there are more suitable people. Your majesty does not have to be bait.”

Despite Vincent’s vehement opposition, I made clear how great I was at being bait.

“Rangers and knights will not look as delicious as me.”

“If you leave this to recruits, the Night Slayer will just go through them all. Look. We are perfect for this attack.”

The royal infantrymen were as honed as the Rangers but had limited battle experience.

“You can find the right person among the knights and deploy them with the royal infantry.”

“Why must I leave my soldiers to someone else?”

“Well, is your arm healed enough?”

“This is but a flesh wound,” I said, raising the arm that I had thought broken but which was now fine. Vincent arched his brow.

There was pain, but I calmly endured it. My soul’s level was rising, and my metabolism was temporarily maximized. This meant that my arm was healing at an alarming rate.

The moment of attack was approaching. I was impatient at Vincent and the commanders for their inaction.

“Think calmly. Someone is going in my place. Even if facing only two Orcs, are you going to go mad trying to be a soldier? Will this operation not become meaningless?”

Vincent remained silent.

“I still don’t understand why I have to do this. Winter Castle is able to beat them without resorting to such reckless methods,” he finally said. He was not wrong.

This fortress, which had endured so many countless winters, would not collapse no matter how mighty the Night Slayer was.

However, it could do a lot of damage. The castle would soon be assaulted by the enemy’s main force. We had to avoid defeat at all costs. The true enemy was not the Night Slayer, but the Warlord.

“If we do not end this battle soon, Winter Castle will fall in the next assault.”

My words elicited harsh expressions, having touched the pride of Vincent and the commanders.

The Warlord had not hidden its presence since it had announced itself last night. In fact, that great presence was drawing closer to Winter Castle at every moment. He moved at a regal pace, yet would soon be here.

“Uncle, what do you say?.”

“We don’t have time. I’ll do what Ian suggested,” my Uncle said, his gaze fixed upon the

mountain range. It seemed that he was only now sensing the presence of the Warlord.

“I don’t know when this Night Slayer will climb the wall. If you make a mistake, you might fight for longer than you had intended,” my Uncle said as he looked at me. I averted my gaze, looking rather at Arwen. Next to her stood a maid, her expression one of utter confusion.

My secret weapon had become an extraordinary item and could not be controlled.

“I will kill all the squads that come up,” I stated plainly.

I could see my Uncle struggling internally, worrying about whether to field vast numbers of men and, in so doing, exposing his weaknesses. I knew that, with the approaching Warlord, we had no time to agonize over strategies.

“If it is too dangerous. I will immediately cancel the operation and return the troops to their original deployment,” my Uncle finally conceded.

“That would take a week.”

The Night Slayer would surely appear before that. I would ensure that he did.

* * *

‘Aahhwooohoo.’

The horn sounded throughout the fortress. The Orcs were rushing the walls, the pure white snow-covered in a sea of green.

“Fire!” The Rangers fired a single volley, targeting the Orcs who carried grappling hooks and siege ladders.

Some fell under the hail of missiles while others charged on through this torrent of arrows, their shields raised. I recognized the heraldry engraved upon their shields: Three interlinked rings being the symbol of the Balahard family. It must have taken them dozens of winters to gather so many shields as loot.

“The motherfuckers!” I heard one ranger shout as he too recognized the emblem.

I stood still, observing events. Once more arrows filled the sky, many unshielded Orcs

being felled.

Soon, the Orcs surrounding Winter Castle numbered about four thousand. Arrows could not kill them all, and a great many were directly beneath the walls.

'Klank!'

The first hook snagged onto the wall. More followed as ladders slammed home as well. Our soldiers managed to cut each hook and topple all the ladders.

Wolf Riders stormed onto the battlefield. So mighty were these wolves that they started leaping onto the walls.

"Knights, prevent the Wolf Riders from intruding!" my Uncle commanded as infantrymen rushed to enact his orders.

Torn and shredded wolves and Orcs tumbled from the walls, spines breaking and necks snapping. The Orcs screamed as they fell.

"Pour now!"

Great cauldrons of oil, tar, and pitch were poured down upon the Orcs. Flaming arrows followed, and multiple Orcs died screaming as the fire consumed them. Our catapults started lobbing stones at the invaders. Yet, the survivors continued climbing. The royal infantry on the Western wall was resisting well, focusing on keeping the Orcs out rather than killing them.

At such a height, any fall meant death.

Arwen was in her element as she slashed away with her blade, like a fish having discovered water. Her face was full of life.

No matter how many Orcs we killed, they just kept on coming. After several hours, the exhaustion of the infantrymen became clear. The knights and Rangers still held fast, their greater experience showing in the heat of battle.

How long would the foe keep this up? How many were left?

Arwen finally sagged against a wall, and the infantrymen showed clear signs of utter exhaustion.

The Night Slayer had sensed our weakness.

'Ahwoooooo!'

A giant wolf had reached the wall and was finding its way down the stairs.

"It only gets worse from here on out!" I shouted as I saw the deformed beast. "Arwen! Take out the Wolf Riders before they gain the wall!"

She grabbed her sword and charged at three of the riders, slicing off Orcish legs and opening lupine bellies.

The other Wolf Riders grouped up for an assault on the western section while the Orc Warriors kept throwing themselves at the walls.

The Night Slayer had not yet appeared. I did not intend to allow him to wait for his food to cook.

"Alright, let's do this!"

I summoned the twilight and exhaled. A blue flame now burned on the tip of my sword. This flame of true spirit existed to appease the soul by burning Orcs. I raised my blade to the sky. As if in reaction to my flaming sword, great energy arose from across the field of battle.

Night Slayer.

He could no longer withstand his hunger as he set foot upon the battlefield. From afar, the huge Orc could be seen charging toward us, seemingly anxious that the delicious food would be stolen by someone else.

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